After I Met You

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After I Met You

by Amandyalmonds

Summary

"They're not going to go through with the marriage proposal though, right?" Jiang Cheng reasoned. "You're ours. And surely the Lan sect wouldn't want a huli jing, let alone the famed Hanguang-jun."

"Exactly," Wei Wuxian said with a grin. "The Lans are too stuck up to know how to handle someone like me, and they won't risk forcing their precious Hanguang-jun into such a marriage."

Or, after the end of the war, Wei Wuxian is offered as the last known huli jing to marry into the Lan royal family. The only problem is that Wei Wuxian has never met the man he's marrying, and he's not sure he'll survive in a palace with over three-thousand rules.

Notes

This is the most self-indulgent thing I've ever written.

With that in mind I can promise this is not meant to be historically accurate. I'm simply having some fun, because I wanted to write something with a certain feeling, like honey in warm tea on a very, very cold day.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

If Wei Wuxian had to spend one more day in Jinlintai he was going to *scream.*

Or die from boredom.

Or start spiking everyone's drinks.

He'd heard the Lan dragons couldn't hold their liquor, and with each passing day he became increasingly tempted to see what would happen if he slipped alcohol into their tea.

They were on their fifth consecutive day of negotiations at the cultivation conference, and it didn't seem like they were going to end anytime soon. Not that Wei Wuxian thought finalizing the end of the war was going to be easy, but after the downfall of the Wens he didn't think he'd need to be involved with the meetings and paperwork.

Instead, he was stuck listening to the Jin tigers posturing and vying for wartime compensation from the Lan. The palace had already provided them aid, but that didn't stop the Jins from spending every meeting wheedling the Lan dragons for more. They relied on the Lan's adherence to their sect rules, which prevented the Lans from simply chucking the Jins from the meetings.

And from shifting into their true forms and devouring them whole.

Not that anyone had ever seen a Lan dragon in their true form, let alone seen them eat someone.

But well, Wei Wuxian could hope for the impossible.

As the head disciple of the Jiang sect, Wei Wuxian was required to attend the negotiation meetings, sitting a half-step behind Jiang Cheng. He wasn't allowed to speak, however, so he spent the majority of the meetings picturing himself throwing various objects at Jin Guangshan.

Wei Wuxian was sure it'd be hilarious to see the tiger splutter and turn red with rage, but with Madam Yu sitting beside Jiang Cheng, he didn't dare try.

He'd tuned out the current discussion long ago, when yet another Jin started praising Jin Guangshan's efforts during the war.

His very *nonexistent* ones.

After all, every cultivator in the room knew the Jin sect had only joined the war once it looked like the Wens would lose.

Attention drifting, Wei Wuxian glanced around the hall. No one stood to interrupt the Jin cultivators, but most everyone's features displayed their annoyance. Especially from the

minor sects, who had fewer rules about hiding their partial forms. Their ears twitched and their tails lashed every time the Jins said something particularly boastful.

In contrast, the Jin and Nie almost always hid their features. Wei Wuxian only knew some of their contingent was growing agitated from the sharp flicks of Nie Huaisang's fan and the way Nie Mingjue gritted his teeth with every word.

The Lan cultivators were the only wild card.

As dragons, they were notorious for proudly displaying their horns and tails, hues varying from deep blue to the purest white. But they showed little emotion, and the only Lan to move or speak since the meeting began was the palace's representative, Lan Qiren.

Wei Wuxian was making a mental list of ways he could break the few Lan rules he knew when he noticed Jiang Cheng visibly wince, pressing his ears against his head.

Unlike the rest of the Jiang sect, Jiang Cheng's ears and tail were black as night and matched his mother's; proudly displaying their heritage as descendants from the forest cats of Meishin Yu. Madam Yu—who had arrived in place of Jiang Fengmian due to him recovering from a war injury—sat next to Jiang Cheng and yet, her ears hadn't so much as twitched.

But her posture did stiffen, the slightest change as if in preparation for a fight.

Unsettled, Wei Wuxian refocused on the current conversation.

"Madam Yu, is there something you wish to contribute?" Lan Qiren asked, turning to look at Madam Yu. She spared Lan Qiren a glance before standing, and ignored several minor sect leaders who spluttered in offense.

"The Jiang sect will not sit quietly while our contributions are not acknowledged." Madam Yu's voice was sharp and cold, and Wei Wuxian's eyes widened at the accusation.

"Madam Yu," Jin Guangshan interjected, lazily waving a hand, "No one here has ignored what little the Jiang sect accomplished during the war."

Jiang Cheng hissed and Wei Wuxian dug his fingers into his lap, forcing himself to not react. *As if they hadn't saved Jin cultivators on more than one occasion!*

"Have you not?" Madam Yu asked, her expression calm. "There has been no mention of how the Jiang will receive reparations for our contributions, despite negotiating reparations for the Jin and Nie."

Jin Guangshan scoffed, gesturing to the various sect leaders around him.

"Surely there has been a misunderstanding. We've been negotiating for every sect present, not only our own."

"Negotiating for the Jin, yes. You have also graciously allowed sect leader Nie to speak for himself. Yet, you have forgotten the Jiang by allowing the minor sects to speak before us."

As Madam Yu spoke, Wei Wuxian brushed against Jiang Cheng's tail to stop it from lashing. Jiang Cheng turned and glared, meeting Wei Wuxian's eyes for a moment before he huffed and wrapped his tail around his knees.

In the tense silence, several minor sect leaders shifted uneasily.

"The Jiang have yet to express their wishes." Lan Qiren glanced at Jin Guangshan's sour expression then tipped his head toward Madam Yu. "The Lan holds the Jiang in high regard for their war contributions and wish to compensate them for their efforts. As such, you may proceed."

Madam Yu returned his acknowledgement before she faced the rest of the hall.

"The Jiang sect requests an alliance with the Lan."

Wei Wuxian inched forward to Jiang Cheng's side, giving him a questioning look. His brother seemed similarly confused, and shook his head at Wei Wuxian. Surprise flickered over Lan Qiren's face before he quickly schooled his expression into one of mild confusion.

"There is already an alliance between the Lan and the Jiang sect," Lan Qiren replied, his voice ringing throughout the hall. "We provided provisions for restoring Lotus Pier, and in return your generals were pivotal in ending the war."

Which was *technically* true.

Wei Wuxian had been one of those generals himself, and their involvement in the war after the Wens burned Lotus Pier was well known. Further, the Lan had been equally generous in return after the siege on the Cloud Recesses, distributing aid to all three of the remaining main sects.

So what was Madam Yu getting at?

Several sect leaders nodded at Lan Qiren's words, and then Madam Yu's tone shifted from polite to dangerous.

"You misunderstand me, Lan Qiren. The Jiang sect requests a *formal* alliance with the Lan. One that extends beyond the boundaries of wartime. The Nie are tied to the royal family through brotherhood with the current emperor," she explained, "as are the Jin, through Jin Guangshan's second son."

From across the room, Nie Mingjue frowned and his brother closed his fan with a sharp *snap*. Jin Guangshan's face slowly turned red while Jin Guangyao—the second son in question—looked as placid as ever.

"How have we not been excluded, when no Lan has offered to build such a relationship between our sects?"

The quiet rage in Madam Yu's voice was terrifying, and it sent a ripple of anxiety twisting through Wei Wuxian. He knew it wasn't directed at him, but he couldn't stop the way his ears and tails itched to be free and his instincts told him to *run*.

Lan Qiren didn't flinch at her accusation, but several Lan cultivators behind him looked concerned.

"Madam Yu, my brotherhood with his majesty has nothing to do with—"

"Does it not?" Madam Yu snapped, cutting Nie Mingjue off. "There are rumors you call his majesty by name."

Several Nie cultivators jerked in visible anger, their hands straying toward their sabers before Nie Mingjue quickly told them to stand down.

"My relation to the emperor has nothing to do with the alliance between our sects," Nie Mingjue repeated, his expression dark.

"Yet you admit to an alliance," Madam Yu said with an air of victory, similar to the way she looked after she'd subjected Wei Wuxian to a particularly painful punishment.

"Yu-furen." Jin Guangyao softly spoke, pulling everyone's attention to where he stood in a slight bow beside Jin Zixuan. "If this one may, their familiarity should not be surprising. Neither should ours, as his majesty sheltered with this one during the siege on the Cloud Recesses."

"However," Jin Guangyao continued, "although this one is too lowly to be making such a suggestion, this one would agree there is an imbalance among the great sects. It is understandable the Jiang want an alliance of their own."

Jin Guangshan scowled in the resulting silence, and then Lan Qiren cleared his throat.

"The Lan sect concedes there may be an imbalance among the sects, and would be amenable to hearing a proposal from the Jiang, should they have one prepared." Lan Qiren said, likely assuming that Madam Yu hadn't considered a proposal yet.

Madam Yu turned to Lan Qiren, danger lurking in her calm demeanor.

"The Jiang propose a marital alliance between the royal family and our sect."

Whispers echoed throughout the room and Jiang Cheng stared at his mother in horror. Wei Wuxian felt bile rise in his throat and he swallowed it down, trying to keep his breathing steady and his anger at bay.

Did she plan on ending Shijie's engagement with the peacock?

Not that Wei Wuxian *liked* the peacock, but Shijie was somehow in love with the man and she'd cry if their engagement ended.

And Wei Wuxian couldn't bear to see her cry.

Jin Guangshan's face twisted in anger and he spat his next words. "With the emperor? You dare to presume—"

“There are two jades of Lan, are there not?” Madam Yu calmly interrupted.

Several Lan cultivators let out shocked gasps, their expressions breaking into varied looks of anger and dismay. The second jade of Lan was Hanguang-jun, after all. He had been one of the lynchpins of the war and had single-handedly felled scores of Wen cultivators in some of the most hopeless battles.

Truly a light-bearing lord, the stories proclaimed.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure how a man described as cold and expressionless could also be the bringer of light, but he’d never actually met the man. Wei Wuxian had fought on the opposite war front from Hanguang-jun, and all he knew about the second jade was from what he’d heard when passing through towns.

Lan Qiren pursed his lips, taking a moment to straighten his robes and brush away non-existent creases in the fabric.

“Who do you suggest from YunmengJiang?” Lan Qiren eventually asked. “It is our understanding that the Jiang sect’s daughter is betrothed to another. Surely the Jiang do not mean to offer their sole male heir?”

Wei Wuxian quickly grabbed Jiang Cheng’s robes to stop his brother from rising, holding him back as Jiang Cheng shook in barely suppressed anger.

There was no way Madam Yu would force Jiang Cheng to marry into the Lan, and if she wasn’t ending Shijie’s engagement *then who was she…?*

Wei Wuxian was abruptly glad he wasn’t allowed to display his ears and tails, because he realized what Madam Yu was going to propose a moment before she did so, and a slow, syrupy tangle of emotions threatened to devour him whole.

“The Jiang sect offers our head disciple, Wei Wuxian, to marry into an alliance with the Lan.”

Wei Wuxian swayed into Jiang Cheng’s side, unable to respond to his brother’s hissed *“Did you know about this?”*

He had not known.

Wei Wuxian’s blood pounded loudly in his ears.

“Don’t look so surprised. He is of marrying age and a ward of the Jiang sect,” Madam Yu explained. “And the second jade has yet to take a spouse.”

Shocked whispers echoed throughout the hall.

“Surely the son of a servant—!”

“Though he is the son of a servant, he is also a war general,” Madam Yu snapped, interrupting a minor sect leader. “His value to the Lan, however, lay not in his war contributions but in his true nature.”

Wei Wuxian tightened his grip on his brother's robes.

Jiang Cheng sent him a horrified look, because they both knew what Madam Yu was going to say. A secret Wei Wuxian had been forced to keep for the last fifteen years lest he wanted to be banished from the Jiang sect.

She couldn't—

"Wei Wuxian is a *huli jing*."

There was a shocked moment of silence, and then the hall broke into chaos.

Wei Wuxian was on his feet and retreating from Madam Yu as cultivators shouted in outrage, his fingers twitching toward his sword. As soon as he moved, however, several cultivators drew their own swords and lunged toward the Jiang contingent.

"Mother! You—"

Madam Yu whipped around toward Jiang Cheng. *"It is not your place to talk,"* she scolded, then pinned Wei Wuxian in place with a piercing glare. "And you! You will sit down and *keep quiet."*

Wei Wuxian flinched and then bowed, forcing himself to retake his seat despite the armed cultivators rushing toward him. Jiang Cheng quickly moved in front of Wei Wuxian; his ears pressed against his head and barring his teeth.

"I can't believe you've been protecting a *huli jing!*"

"Didn't the Wens finish them off ages ago?"

"Who cares what happened? How could you let one of them into this meeting, let alone your —"

"Silence." Lan Qiren's command rang with the full force of an elder dragon, and around the room cultivators' mouths clicked shut. The Lan contingent quickly surrounded every cultivator who had drawn their sword.

"These meetings are to be *peaceful,*" Lan Qiren stressed, eyeing the cultivators with their swords on display until they sheathed them and went back to their seats. The Lan cultivators, however, stayed positioned throughout the room.

"Madam Yu, this is quite the revelation, and it is concerning that the Jiang haven't previously brought his nature to our attention," Lan Qiren said. "There is a reason that among cultivators who descend from divine spirits, the *huli jing* were thought to have been wiped out."

Wei Wuxian winced and Jiang Cheng glared at Lan Qiren, possessively curling his tail around Wei Wuxian's arm.

"The Jiang are aware," Madam Yu replied. "We offer him for an alliance due to the rareness of his nature and to the restrictions the Lan sect's rules will place upon him. What better way

to prevent a *huli jing* from destroying the sects than to bind him under the Lan's watch?"

Lan Qiren furrowed his brow, appearing to give Madam Yu's words some thought, and Wei Wuxian watched with growing dread.

The Lan rules were said to number over three thousand.

They dictated everything the Lans did, from their style of dress to their cold demeaner, and they were rumored to be important enough within the palace that any egregious rule-breaking would result in banishment.

Wei Wuxian wouldn't last a week.

"Yu-furen, if this one may interject, doesn't Wei-gongzi have a son? Would that not violate the Lan spousal rules?" Jin Guangyao quietly asked, looking between Lan Qiren and Madam Yu. Jiang Cheng sucked in a breath and Wei Wuxian swallowed a reflexive growl, wanting to bare his teeth at the shorter man.

"It can be arranged that he will not."

Whatever Wei Wuxian had expected Madam Yu to say, it hadn't been *that.*

He tried to remember to breathe, but he couldn't catch his breath as fear swept through him. It was one thing to offer him up for an alliance, *but for Madam Yu to suggest getting rid of A-Yuan…*

Jin Guangyao blinked, seemingly caught off-guard, and the furrow between Lan Qiren's brows deepened.

"Surely you are not suggesting to…dispose of the child?" Lan Qiren hesitantly asked.

"The child is also a *huli jing*, so the Lan would only be preventing future catastrophe," Madam Yu replied.

Wei Wuxian bit his check until he tasted blood, clenching his fists. *How dare she—*

"If the Lan want the child, however, they may have him." Madam Yu pursed her lips. "I only mention the child as evidence of Wei Wuxian's virility as a *huli jing*."

This time, it was Jiang Cheng who dug his hands into Wei Wuxian's robes and stopped him from surging to his feet. Lan Qiren and several Lan cultivators blanched in clear displeasure.

Madam Yu lifted her chin at Lan Qiren, narrowing her eyes. "What? The child proves he is fertile. Let the continuation of the Lan bloodline not be a hinderance to this negotiation."

Wei Wuxian shook in barely-suppressed rage.

He knew Madam Yu had never approved of him bringing A-Yuan to Lotus Pier, but she'd made it perfectly clear that Wei Wuxian's only place was beside Jiang Cheng, always a half-step behind him now and in the future once Jiang Cheng took over the sect.

She'd never talked about arranging Wei Wuxian's marriage.

Which was fine, really. Wei Wuxian wanted to stay by Jiang Cheng's side. He liked being head disciple and running around Lotus Pier, drinking wine and chasing A-Yuan while knowing that as long as he didn't step too far or cause too much trouble, he'd be able to stay.

Or so he'd thought.

"That will not be—" One of the Lan cultivators started, only to be silenced by Lan Qiren. The elder shook his head before returning Madam Yu's look.

"The Lan acknowledge your proposal," Lan Qiren said. "However, such a proposal requires the serious consideration of our elders and the royal family. We will consult on this matter and provide our decision after the conference ends."

"The Jiang sect understands and accepts your offer," Madam Yu replied before she retook her seat, fanning her robes around herself.

Throughout the hall several cultivators still looked agitated, but they slowly returned to their seats and waited for Lan Qiren to continue the meeting.

Wei Wuxian stared at the ground as he got a hold on his anger, ignoring Jiang Cheng's increasingly not-subtle whispers for his attention. Jiang Cheng was going to lose it as soon as the meeting ended, but for now Wei Wuxian was trying to keep himself together. He dug his hands into his knees and let Lan Qiren's voice wash over him, desperately wishing for the meeting to end.

As soon as Lan Qiren dismissed everyone, Wei Wuxian hurried with Jiang Cheng to their shared room. Jiang Cheng practically vibrated as they walked, his tail lashing with every step. Jiang Cheng managed to hold his tongue until they were in their room and Wei Wuxian applied a silencing charm, and then he exploded, shoving Wei Wuxian against the door.

"What the actual *fuck!*" Jiang Cheng shouted, digging his hands into Wei Wuxian's robes. "Did you know about this?"

Wei Wuxian knocked Jiang Cheng's hands away, his own anger bubbling into his throat.

"Of course I didn't know!" Wei Wuxian yelled, hating the betrayal in his voice and the way Jiang Cheng reached for him again in desperation.

"They're not going to go through with it though, right?" Jiang Cheng reasoned. "You're *ours*. And surely the Lan sect wouldn't want a *huli jing*, let alone the famed Hanguang-jun."

Wei Wuxian knew that Jiang Cheng didn't believe in the stories about *huli jing*. *He knew.* But it didn't stop his brother's words from hurting.

Wei Wuxian forced a grin and leaned into his brother's touch, playing along. "Exactly. The Lans are too stuck up to know how to handle someone like me, and they can't risk forcing their precious Hanguang-jun into such a marriage."

Jiang Cheng wilted in relief, releasing Wei Wuxian before he began stomping around their room. “Still, for mother to even propose such an idea…she has to know how it looks that we were hiding fox spirits.”

This time Wei Wuxian wasn’t quick enough to hide his wince, but thankfully Jiang Cheng was too angry to notice.

“And what about me?” Jiang Cheng continued, throwing Wei Wuxian a broken look. “We’re supposed to be…you’re supposed to be by my side when I become sect leader.”

Wei Wuxian swallowed his feelings and punched Jiang Cheng in the shoulder. “Don’t worry A-Cheng, you can’t get rid of me that easily,” he said, grinning when Jiang Cheng scowled and lashed his tail

“Don’t call me that! I’m not a kid anymore,” he shouted and grabbed a pillow from his bed, chucking it at Wei Wuxian’s face. Wei Wuxian cackled as he dodged, sticking out his tongue.

“It’s okay shidi, I promise I’ll always be there when you’re drunk and scaring away your marital prospects!”

Jiang Cheng squawked and tackled Wei Wuxian to the floor. They scuffled, trying to pin one another down until their fighting dissolved into boyish bickering.

They finally fell apart sometime later, exhausted and laughing as they pushed Madam Yu’s proposal to the back of their minds.

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Wei Wuxian sat through meetings for three more days until, mercifully, Lan Qiren called an end to the conference.

Somehow no one else brought up Wei Wuxian’s nature, although several cultivators openly glared at him throughout the rest of the meetings. Wei Wuxian hoped the Lan might forget about the proposal, but then Lan Qiren approached Madam Yu as the Jiang sect was readying to leave.

Lan Qiren explained that they should expect to hear their final decision within the next fortnight, after they discussed the matter with their sect. He then bowed and departed while Wei Wuxian tried not to worry.

Wei Wuxian hadn’t been lying to Jiang Cheng about the proposal. He *was* a poor fit to marry someone from the Lan royal family. He tried to convince himself that all he needed to do was wait until the Lan sect rejected the proposal and everything went back to normal.

Madam Yu would be livid, but at least Wei Wuxian wouldn’t have to leave Lotus Pier.

As the Jiang contingent stepped on their swords to leave, Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but shiver, drawing his robes closer as they lifted into the air and headed home.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as they returned to Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian slipped from Madam Yu's line of sight and ran to the medical pavilion. Their trip to Jinlintai had been the longest he'd been away from Lotus Pier since the war ended, and he was worried that—

"Baba!" A young voice chirped as Wei Wuxian rounded the corner to the medical pavilion, and within seconds he was almost bowled over by an energetic three-year-old in red and black robes. A-Yuan's white ears slipped out in his excitement, and Wei Wuxian skillfully caught him and swung him against his chest, smothering him with playful nips.

A-Yuan squealed with delight and Wei Wuxian heard several chuckles from the room at large. He glanced up to see several doctors looking at them fondly, including Wen Qing, who rolled her eyes and walked over, smoothing a hand over A-Yuan's ears as a reminder to put them away.

"Aiya, Doctor Liu, how can I spoil my son when you're teaching him his manners?" Wei Wuxian quipped, grinning at the face Wen Qing made. She didn't particularly like the name she'd given upon their arrival to Lotus Pier, but it had been necessary to hide her background as a Wen.

As was her Jiang hairstyle, which he had taught her over the span of several disgruntled mornings.

"Baba, be nice to Qing-jiejie!" A-Yuan scolded, puffing his cheeks as he obediently hid his ears. At least Wen Qing hadn't changed her given name, mainly because they'd been worried A-Yuan would slip up.

"Wei Wuxian wouldn't know how to be nice to a doctor unless we knocked him out first," Wen Qing calmly replied.

"Hey!" Wei Wuxian protested, and A-Yuan had the audacity to burst into giggles, quickly worming his way down from Wei Wuxian's arms.

"Qing-jiejie says you play too much to be a good da-shixiong," A-Yuan said, then darted behind several doctors when Wei Wuxian let out an angry squawk.

"Lies!" Wei Wuxian called, throwing Wen Qing a playful smile. "Slander!" He added, as A-Yuan laughed and the doctors watched in fond exasperation.

Thankfully, they didn't mind when Wei Wuxian chased A-Yuan around their pavilion provided they weren't seeing to a patient. Due to the raging fever A-Yuan had when Wei Wuxian had brought him to Lotus Pier, A-Yuan had quickly grown on the doctors from his time spent in the medical pavilion.

Which was helpful, because the doctors kept A-Yuan away when Wei Wuxian had to be carried in after one of Madam Yu's punishments.

"How did the conference go?" Wen Qing asked, her eyes trailing A-Yuan around the room. Wei Wuxian made a displeased noise and her attention snapped to him; her gaze fierce.

"It's nothing too bad, don't worry," Wei Wuxian said, then deflated under her stern look. "Okay, okay, it was awful," he allowed. "I'll tell you over dinner?"

Wen Qing reluctantly agreed and then walked to where several piles of herbs laid neatly across a table. Relieved, Wei Wuxian shook a smile onto his face and chased after A-Yuan. He scooped A-Yuan into his arms—much to A-Yuan's delight—and ferreted him away from the medical pavilion, laughing as A-Yuan pestered him with questions about the conference.

He had dinner with Wen Qing later that night, and she waited until Wei Wuxian tucked A-Yuan into bed next door and applied a silencing charm to his own door before questioning him.

Wei Wuxian opened a jar of wine, swallowed several gulps, and then proceeded to recount the conference until Wen Qing was on her feet and pacing in anger.

"How dare she!" Wen Qing spat, her hands digging into her robes. Wei Wuxian grimaced and swallowed another mouthful of wine. "Not only does she put you in danger, but to pawn you off to the Lan…"

As if the Lan sect would ever want him.

"Wen Qing, it's not like the Lan will accept her proposal," he reasoned. "Unless they're particularly concerned with passing on their bloodline, there's no advantage to inviting a *huli jing* into their sect."

Wen Qing's face twisted, and then she sat across from Wei Wuxian and stole the rest of his wine. "The Lan are one of the oldest sects; it wouldn't be surprising if they were looking to introduce new blood into the dragon lineage. But it wouldn't be…"

She trailed off and Wei Wuxian tried to swipe back his wine, only for her to glare and threaten to dump it out the window. *Rude.*

"They won't accept," Wei Wuxian repeated as he rested his chin on his hand. It was presumptuous for Madam Yu to even make the proposal, let alone for the Lan to accept a fox spirit into their sect. He pursed his lips and stared at the table, glumly tracing patterns into the wood.

"Wei Wuxian, you're not worthless," Wen Qing quietly said, setting down the wine. "Regardless of your nature, you're an accomplished war general, and they'd be lucky to have you."

He loved Wen Qing, he really did, but she didn't need to lie to him.

“Ah, Wen Qing, I’m well aware my successes are only due to my crafty nature,” he chuckled, avoiding her gaze. He couldn’t stand to see any guilt in her expression, because he *knew* he’d only done so well in the war because of his quick-thinking and foxlike instincts.

It didn’t mean that it didn’t hurt to think about, though.

“That’s not…” Wen Qing sighed. “Regardless, there’s nothing we can do until the Lan sect delivers their decision. Try not to let it bother you.”

Wei Wuxian reluctantly agreed, then whined when Wen Qing left and took the rest of the wine with her.

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The next two weeks passed achingly slow for Wei Wuxian, and with each passing day the Lan sect’s deadline loomed larger.

Wei Wuxian spent his days exploring the Yunmeng markets and carrying A-Yuan from stall to stall. Wei Wuxian hadn’t told A-Yuan about the possibility of his betrothal—it felt *wrong* to even think about—and Wen Qing agreed they shouldn’t tell A-Yuan unless the alliance went through. They didn’t want to worry him if nothing came of it.

So instead, Wei Wuxian acted like nothing had happened.

He went about his sect duties, avoided Madam Yu, and tackled Jiang Cheng off the docks when his brother least expected it.

Despite being a feline spirit, Jiang Cheng had taken to water like any other Jiang disciple, and anytime Wei Wuxian shoved him into the water his brother reached out and dragged him along. Which was particularly delightful when A-Yuan was watching and Jiang Cheng pulled him in too, carting A-Yuan around on his shoulders.

Originally, Wei Wuxian had been worried about how Jiang Cheng would react to A-Yuan; that he might somehow sense A-Yuan was a Wen.

Instead, after Jiang Cheng had kicked and shoved Wei Wuxian off the docks for not telling him that he had been *pregnant during the war, what the fuck Wei Wuxian,* he’d taken to A-Yuan as easily as A-Yuan had taken to Lotus Pier.

Not that Wei Wuxian had *actually* carried A-Yuan during the war, but well.

Madam Yu had taken one look at Wei Wuxian when he’d brought Wen Qing and A-Yuan home and snapped at him for his audacity to bring beggars into the sect. Wei Wuxian might have panicked and blurted that A-Yuan was his son, and that Wen Qing was the doctor who helped deliver him.

Madam Yu had scowled but reluctantly allowed them to stay, partially due to Jiang-shushu’s insistence that Wei Wuxian’s family was welcome in Lotus Pier.

On the day the Lan sect's deadline arrived, Wei Wuxian was knee-deep in the waters around Lotus Pier and catching fish with a group of the youngest shidi. Jiang Cheng sat on the docks and bereted him with A-Yuan laughing on his lap, while Jiang Yanli watched from a nearby pavilion and called out occasional encouragements.

Wei Wuxian's only warning was the excited yelling of one of the older shimei. She darted across the docks, caught sight of Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, and started to yell before she overshot the edge and crashed into the water.

The next several moments were spent hauling her from the water until, red-faced, she pointed toward the gates and wheezed, "The Lan are here!"

Wei Wuxian exchanged a look with Jiang Cheng before Wei Wuxian scooped A-Yuan into his arms and they took off towards the entrance to Lotus pier.

A wave of dread washed over Wei Wuxian when they arrived at the gate, and he reflexively tightened his arms around A-Yuan.

The Lan brought a full contingent.

Jiang Cheng swore as their eyes roved over the Lan cultivators. Lan Qiren stood imposingly at the front of the group, exchanging greetings with Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian.

"This could mean anything," Jiang Cheng breathed, gripping Wei Wuxian's shoulder. "For all we know they're politely turning us down," he added, although they both knew the Lan wouldn't send so many cultivators to present a rejection.

"Baba? What's going on?" A-Yuan asked and Wei Wuxian quietly responded, bouncing him on his hip.

"Nothing, my little radish. The Lan dragons have come for a visit, that's all." A-Yuan frowned but nodded, tucking himself into the side of Wei Wuxian's neck.

The Lans looked toward them and Wei Wuxian panicked, forcing himself to stay by Jiang Cheng's side when Lan Qiren himself walked over and greeted them. Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian quickly returned the greeting, Wei Wuxian bowing as far as he could with A-Yuan in his arms.

Lan Qiren looked them over, slightly pursing his lips as he gazed at A-Yuan.

"This is your…son?" Lan Qiren asked slowly. Wei Wuxian straightened and nudged A-Yuan away from his neck.

"Yes, Lan-xiansheng." Wei Wuxian replied. "This one is Wei Yuan."

A-Yuan shyly bowed from Wei Wuxian's arms then hid his face against Wei Wuxian's neck again. Wei Wuxian soothingly rubbed A-Yuan's back and gave Lan Qiren a sheepish look.

"Please forgive this one, he's shy sometimes," Wei Wuxian half-heartedly laughed then clicked his mouth shut when Lan Qiren's expression did not so much as twitch. Thankfully,

by this time Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian had joined them, stopping by Lan Qiren's side.

"We'd like for you to attend the negotiation meetings," Jiang Fengmian said with a soft smile, directing his comment at Jiang Cheng. Jiang Cheng started, his ears flicking back for a moment as he glanced at Wei Wuxian.

"Wei Wuxian will not be joining us," Madam Yu stated and Jiang Fengmian's smile fell away. Wei Wuxian bit his tongue, knowing that he had no say in the matter.

"What she means is that we do not wish to cause you undue worry during the negotiations," Jiang Fengmian explained. "Wei Wuxian, you may return to your duties in the meantime."

Wei Wuxian swallowed his worry and smiled. "Of course, Jiang-shushu. This one only hopes the negotiations go well."

Wei Wuxian bowed again as everyone left and then stood there without moving, trying to force down the worry bubbling through him. He didn't realize he'd pulled A-Yuan closer until A-Yuan's hands wrapped around his neck.

A-Yuan was trembling.

"Baobei, I promise everything's alright," Wei Wuxian softly said, using A-Yuan to ground himself because his worry didn't matter when his son was *shaking.*

After several moments A-Yuan nodded into his neck and then lifted his head, turning to stare at the gates where the majority of the Lan cultivators silently stood.

"They're pretty," A-Yuan breathed, and the nonsensical comment steadied Wei Wuxian. He snorted and saluted the Lan contingent.

"My son thinks you're pretty!" Wei Wuxian called, and then grinned when several of the Lan cultivators startled. One or two of them even blushed, and Wei Wuxian cackled as he ran off with A-Yuan before they could cause any more trouble.

That evening, after Wei Wuxian had tucked A-Yuan into bed, Jiang Yanli joined him for a tense dinner that came and went as they heard nothing from the hall where the discussions were taking place. She'd made him some of his favorite dishes, but he couldn't manage to eat more than half before he caught himself staring into his food, worrying about whether the Lan would accept their alliance.

Because if they did, it meant that he'd be leaving Lotus Pier.

Which meant leaving Jiang Cheng. And Shijie.

And if the Lan wouldn't let him take A-Yuan he'd—

"A-Xian, it will be okay," Shijie gently said, covering his hand with her own. Wei Wuxian blinked, realizing that his eyes felt suspiciously wet and Shijie looked concerned.

Wei Wuxian shook himself and nodded, pulling his hand away as he forced himself to eat the rest of his dinner. Shijie didn't question him further, but she dropped a gentle kiss onto his head after she cleared their bowls and left.

By the time the negotiations ended, the moon had risen and Wei Wuxian was sitting at the edge of a dock, swirling wine in one hand while he leaned on the other. Thankfully the nights were still warm this far into summer, but Wei Wuxian shivered as he thought about the proposed betrothal.

Over three-thousand rules. Wei Wuxian mused as he sipped his wine. *And it snows heavily in the winter.*

Wei Wuxian couldn't stand the cold.

He had faint memories of loving snow before his parents died, but much more prominent were memories of scrambling through Yiling in the cold. He could probably handle the snow in the Cloud Recesses, if he bundled himself in several robes.

But he wasn't sure he could remember over three-thousand rules, let alone make sure he didn't break enough of them to get kicked out.

And if they kicked him out, where would he go?

Wei Wuxian finished his wine and stared into the night sky, and at some point Jiang Cheng found him there and sat beside him. Jiang Cheng grabbed the discarded wine jar and tried to take a drink, only to scowl when he realized it was empty.

Wei Wuxian couldn't look at him.

Because if Wei Wuxian looked at him, then he'd *see* what had happened because his brother was shit at hiding his feelings. They sat in silence for several moments before Jiang Cheng spoke.

"They agreed to the proposal."

Wei Wuxian flinched.

"Fucking hell they *agreed,*" Jiang Cheng spat, his voice breaking on the words. Another moment and he slapped his hand against the dock, his tail lashing. *"Why the hell did they agree?"*

Wei Wuxian steeled himself against the emotions threatening to drag him under. He wanted Jiang Cheng to be wrong, but judging by the way his shidi looked ready to throw the wine jar into the lake, he hadn't misheard.

"I should…I need to…" Wei Wuxian started as he lurched to his feet. Jiang Cheng reached out and grabbed his robes, and then Wei Wuxian finally looked at his brother.

He immediately wished he hadn't, because his brother looked *devastated.*

“Wei Wuxian you…”

“I should go find Jiang-shushu,” Wei Wuxian managed, pushing Jiang Cheng’s hands away. Jiang Cheng didn’t stop him and Wei Wuxian steadied himself, sucking in a breath before he left Jiang Cheng on the docks and headed toward the main hall.

Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu were not in the main hall, but Wei Wuxian found them back at the gates, sending the Lan contingent off.

The last Lan had vanished into the distance when Wei Wuxian arrived. Jiang Fengmian turned to him, his face a mask of sorrow and Wei Wuxian suddenly felt the full weight of what had been decided.

He was going to be married.

Wei Wuxian only managed to stay on his feet because Madam Yu was watching.

“Jiang-shushu, I—”

“Come along,” Madam Yu interrupted, ignoring the plaintive look Jiang Fengmian gave her. He sighed and turned to Wei Wuxian.

“She is right. There is much to discuss,” he said, and Wei Wuxian hesitantly followed them as they headed into the main hall.

“As you may have heard, the Lan accepted our proposal,” Jiang Fengmian said once they had settled around a low table. Wei Wuxian poured them tea before pouring his own, although he doubted he could stomach anything at the moment. Instead, he wrapped his hands around his cup and steadied himself with the warmth.

“You will marry into the Lan sect in two months’ time,” Madam Yu said with a hint of derision. “It appears they see the advantage of keeping a tight rein on a *huli jing*.”

Wei Wuxian tersely nodded.

“My lady, please have some heart,” Jiang Fengmian said, reaching a hand toward Madam Yu that she brushed away. Jiang Fengmian looked stricken before he smoothed his expression and turned to Wei Wuxian. “It was a difficult decision, but it will solidify our alliance with the Lan.”

“This one understands,” Wei Wuxian forced himself to say. Jiang Fengmian sipped his tea and smiled, reaching out to squeeze Wei Wuxian’s hand.

“There is yet good news. The Lan agreed you may bring A-Yuan with you, and anyone you consider part of your household,” Jiang Fengmian explained, and something deep inside Wei Wuxian’s chest unraveled.

He bowed from where he sat. “This one thanks Jiang-shushu for speaking on my son’s behalf.”

Madam Yu scoffed and set her tea down with a sharp *click*. “You should be thankful they were willing to accept *used goods*, let alone the offspring of such behavior.”

“My lady—”

“As part of the betrothal agreement, you will be confined to Lotus Pier and begin learning court etiquette,” Madam Yu continued, ignoring Jiang Fengmian’s protest. “I will not have you thrown out of the palace and disgrace the Jiang name.”

Wei Wuxian’s felt himself pale at her words.

“I will personally oversee your training to assure that you do not use your nature to get out of it, and you will be stripped of your head disciple duties to focus on your lessons,” she added and Wei Wuxian’s breath caught in his throat.

“In the meantime, I will have someone oversee your…son’s training so the child will not cause a scene,” she finished, and Wei Wuxian wanted to knock the tea from her hands. His own training was understandable—he was a fox spirit, after all—but if anyone tried to punish A-Yuan for doing something wrong he’d—

“This one understands, Madam Yu,” Wei Wuxian gritted out as he forced himself to drink his tea and his hands not to shake. The tea tasted like ash in his mouth, and he couldn’t make himself meet either of their gazes, instead staring into the murky water in his cup.

“It’s going to be okay, Wei Ying,” Jiang Fengmian tried to reassure him. Wei Wuxian woodenly nodded, draining the rest of his tea before he fled the room.

Because it didn’t matter what Jiang-shushu promised.

Wei Wuxian had never even met Hanguang-jun, and the thought of marrying a stranger from a sect that was known for their strictness and lack of warmth sent wave after wave of dread curling through him.

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The next morning came too soon, and Wei Wuxian woke to the sound of someone pounding on his door.

He groaned, rolling around in his sheets and ignoring the knocking until Wen Qing started threatening to enter and use her needles on him.

“Alright, I’m coming!” He whined, rolling from his bed to the floor and using a talisman to open his door. Wen Qing walked inside, saw him lying on the floor in a heap, and promptly dragged his warm blankets off him.

Wei Wuxian squawked at the rush of cold air hitting him. “Qing-jie! This maiden is indecent, what are you trying to do to me?” Wei Wuxian playfully wailed as he clutched his sleeping robes to his chest.

To her credit, Wen Qing simply stared at him until he dragged himself from the floor and knelt at the table in his room, puffing his cheeks.

“You’re no fun.”

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. “How you can act like a child despite the Lan’s decision baffles me,” she coldly replied and Wei Wuxian stiffened, the playfulness falling from his expression.

“Aiya, Qing-jie, it’s too early to discuss the betrothal,” Wei Wuxian said as he started preparing tea. Anything to keep him from looking at Wen Qing and seeing the worry in her gaze.

After a few moments Wen Qing sighed, brushing Wei Wuxian’s hands aside and taking over the tea preparation. They sat in silence until Wen Qing poured them tea, and then she knocked a knuckle against the table until Wei Wuxian met her gaze.

“Tell me, are the Lan letting you take A-Yuan?” She asked, and Wei Wuxian nodded. Wen Qing looked relieved, then hardened her eyes and leaned forward.

“I’m going with you two, then,” she said, continuing before Wei Wuxian could respond. “I don’t care what the Lan say, but there’s no way I’m leaving you and A-Yuan alone in the royal palace. The Lan are always looking for new healers; I’ll apply to work in their medical wing and sneak out to visit you.”

Wen Qing frowned into her tea. “Or…you can tell them that I’m a servant. Surely they wouldn’t mind you bringing—”

“Wen Qing,” Wei Wuxian finally interrupted, reaching out and brushing his hand against hers. “You don’t need to lie to the Lan,” he said, then furrowed his brow. “Well, not any more than you do now, at least. The Lan said I could bring my family with me, which includes you.”

Wen Qing blinked and relaxed, her shoulders dropping toward the floor in relief. “Good. That way I can keep an eye on you and your terrible habits,” she said with a small smile. Wei Wuxian playfully whined in response, stretching his hands across the table.

“But then how can I drink my fill of the famous Emperor’s Smile after we get there?”

Wen Qing scoffed, rapping Wei Wuxian’s hands in return. “That’s assuming they’ll let you have alcohol,” she said. “The Lan do not drink, and I’d be surprised if they didn’t expect you to follow their rules.”

Wen Qing was a heartless doctor, and Wei Wuxian let her know that as he rolled around on his floor and complained.

Wen Qing watched him with a raised brow before she forced him to get dressed and face the first day of Madam Yu’s training.

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By the end of the day Wei Wuxian was exhausted from his lessons, but after dinner he returned with A-Yuan to his rooms, knowing he had to tell him about the betrothal. Wei Wuxian sat A-Yuan down and calmly explained what the alliance meant, and that he'd be marrying into the Lan sect.

Wei Wuxian had expected A-Yuan to be confused or to ask him questions, but what he hadn't expected was A-Yuan to burst into tears.

"What's wrong, baobei?" Wei Wuxian babbled as he scooped A-Yuan into his arms, desperately wishing Wen Qing was here. She always knew how to handle crying children, whereas Wei Wuxian had never quite figured out what to do.

A-Yuan buried his face into Wei Wuxian's chest, his small hands digging into Wei Wuxian's robes as he cried. Wei Wuxian rubbed his hand over A-Yuan's back and paced his room, repeatedly asking A-Yuan what was wrong to no avail.

Desperate, Wei Wuxian sent a quick glance toward his window to assure they were alone before he let his ears and tails unfurl.

Letting his features show felt like coming home, like relaxing a muscle he constantly tensed, and Wei Wuxian sighed in relief as his black tails billowed around him. He quickly moved to sit on his bed, his back to the wall as he enveloped himself and A-Yuan with his tails, curling into his son.

It wasn't something Wei Wuxian did often, but when A-Yuan was particularly distraught, surrounding him with Wei Wuxian's tails and scent was the only thing that calmed him down.

Except that this time, A-Yuan wouldn't stop crying.

His son shook in the warm cocoon of Wei Wuxian's tails, A-Yuan's ears and tail appearing as he rubbed his face against Wei Wuxian's chest. *Shit.*

"A-Yuan, baobei, tell your Xian-gege what's wrong," Wei Wuxian pleaded as he smoothed a hand over A-Yuan's head. His son hiccupped, wiping snot and tears onto Wei Wuxian's robes before he mumbled something into Wei Wuxian's chest.

Wei Wuxian sighed and gently nudged A-Yuan's head up. A-Yuan sucked in a shaky breath, refusing to look at Wei Wuxian.

"…I don't want baba to leave," A-Yuan eventually said, shrinking into himself. Confused, Wei Wuxian wiped A-Yuan's face with his sleeve, brushing aways his tears.

"No one's leaving Lotus Pier until the wedding," Wei Wuxian said, only to see A-Yuan's eyes fill with fresh tears.

"But then…" A-Yuan's breath hitched again. "But then you'll be *gone,* just like everyone else," he sobbed. *"I don't want baba to leave me too!"*

And *oh.*

Wei Wuxian furiously blinked away his own tears when he realized what A-Yuan was trying to say.

“A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian gently called, waiting for A-Yuan to meet his gaze. “When I marry Hanguang-jun, you’ll be coming *with* me.”

A-Yuan hiccupped at that, blinking several times as he slowly stopped crying. “We’ll go to the Cloud Resses…the Cloud Recesses together?” He asked, stuttering over the palace’s name. Wei Wuxian smiled and pinched A-Yuan’s cheeks.

“Of course, my little radish. Some silly marriage won’t keep me away from you.”

A-Yuan protested his cheeks being pinched, but nodded at Wei Wuxian’s words. He sank against Wei Wuxian’s chest then pulled one of Wei Wuxian’s tails around him like a furry blanket.

Wei Wuxian quietly held A-Yuan for several moments before A-Yuan spoke again.

“What about Qing-jiejie?”

Wei Wuxian ruffled A-Yuan’s ears and grinned. “She’s coming with us too,” Wei Wuxian replied, and A-Yuan bobbed his head in relief.

Issue resolved, it wasn’t long until A-Yuan fell asleep in Wei Wuxian’s lap, almost completely hidden by Wei Wuxian’s tails. Wei Wuxian watched his son sleep, letting out a small sigh. It couldn’t hurt to let A-Yuan spend the night with him like this, unless Madam Yu personally came to wake Wei Wuxian in the morning.

Which she never did.

With careful movements, Wei Wuxian cradled A-Yuan to his chest and shifted onto his side. He kept A-Yuan within the warmth of his tails and pulled a blanket over them both.

Wei Wuxian listened to A-Yuan’s steady breathing, and within moments drifted to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter and it's off to the palace we go~

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Alskdjh here's another chapter because I couldn't wait longer to post.

-runs away-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the morning they were to leave for Gusu, Wei Wuxian stood outside the gates of Lotus Pier and tried to memorize the way the sun crested over the water.

Vendors were starting to open their stalls and Wei Wuxian breathed in the faint scent of spices, tears pricking his eyes. He'd forgotten that leaving Lotus Pier also meant leaving behind the bustling markets, the teahouse that served his favorite spicy noodles, and the people who'd watched him run through the streets with his brother when they were young.

Wei Wuxian started to brush his sleeve against his eyes before he jerked his arm away. *Madam Yu would whip him again if he ruined his robes.*

Not that Madam Yu was traveling with the wedding party to Gusu, but her voice echoed in the back of Wei Wuxian's mind and he didn't put it past her to suddenly appear and yell at him.

Mainly because Wei Wuxian was wearing the formal robes she had prepared for him for when he moved to the royal palace.

The robes weren't as high-quality as Jiang Cheng's, but they were heavy and fine and Wei Wuxian hadn't believed Madam Yu when she'd mentioned getting them. A tailor had measured him and A-Yuan then Wei Wuxian had gone back to Madam Yu's lessons, forgetting about it until he found a chest of formal robes sitting in his room and a note from Madam Yu not to ruin them.

Wei Wuxian had held his breath when opening the chest, and he shouldn't have been surprised that the robes were red and black. A-Yuan had been ecstatic, running around in circles while Wei Wuxian forced a smile and tucked away his disappointment.

As they waited to leave, suibian hung at Wei Wuxian's hip and A-Yuan stood beside him in his own formal robes. The only hint of YunmengJiang in their appearances were the Jiang sect braids Shijie had woven into their hair. Madam Yu had scowled when she'd seen them, but Shijie had pulled Madam Yu away before she could comment.

The wedding party itself was small, consisting only of himself, A-Yuan, Wen Qing, Jiang Fengmian, and Jiang Cheng. Madam Yu insisted on sending a small contingent, and had

decided to remain behind with Jiang Yanli to help Shijie prepare for her own wedding.

Shijie had teared up when she heard she couldn't go, but Wei Wuxian had insisted it didn't matter, that Shijie was always with him anyways and she had to prepare to marry the peacock.

Shijie had laughed, and Wei Wuxian clung to the sound when he said goodbye.

At the head of the wedding party, Jiang Fengmian directed last-minute arrangements to several disciples, who listened with bobbing heads and chimed *"Yes, sect leader!"* before running away.

Jiang Cheng stood beside his father with his arms crossed, his tail flicking back and forth as he talked to Wen Qing. Wen Qing spoke quietly, her eyes flicking to Wei Wuxian several times while Jiang Cheng scowled. Before Wei Wuxian could make out what they were saying, however, A-Yuan tugged on his hand for his attention.

"What is it, my little radish?" Wei Wuxian asked, looking down. A-Yuan tugged on his hand again and tucked himself against his leg, shaking his head.

Wei Wuxian sighed, bending to pluck A-Yuan from his leg before he let out a pained hiss and stopped, quickly straightening his back. A-Yuan winced at the noise, his ears popping free as he shrunk into himself.

"I don't want to hurt baba when we leave," A-Yuan whispered, and Wei Wuxian cursed under his breath. He crouched to look at A-Yuan, ignoring the pain flaring in his back at the movement.

"You won't hurt me," Wei Wuxian reassured him. "You're going to stand in front of me on my sword and you can hold onto my waist."

A-Yuan scrunched his face and shook his head. "But Baba's back—!" He protested and Wei Wuxian laughed, ruffling his hair and ears.

"Your Xian-gege is fine! Qing-jie helped me last night, and I'll be healed before we reach the royal palace. Isn't that right, Qing-jie?" Wei Wuxian directed the last part to Wen Qing, who startled and glanced their way.

She pursed her lips, giving him her *don't tell lies about me* look before she resumed her conversation with Jiang Cheng. Wei Wuxian awkwardly chuckled, straightening and grabbing A-Yuan's hand with a carefree smile.

"Aiya, let's not bother her now, okay? I'm all better, really," Wei Wuxian insisted. A-Yuan didn't look convinced, but he eventually nodded and put his ears away, sticking by Wei Wuxian's side until Jiang Fengmian called for them to leave.

Jiang Cheng gave Wei Wuxian a complicated look when they stepped onto their respective swords. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he turned away when Wei Wuxian moved to help A-Yuan onto suibian.

A-Yuan gingerly stepped on and plastered himself to Wei Wuxian's waist, hiding his face in his robes. Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth when A-Yuan's arms wrapped around him, and then steadied A-Yuan on his sword.

Jiang Fengmian gave the command to leave, and Wei Wuxian held tightly to A-Yuan as they lifted into the air and left.

They flew until the sun was setting in the sky and Jiang Fengmian directed them to land at the edges of a bustling town. Wei Wuxian touched down beside Jiang Cheng, breathing slowly as he shivered in pain.

At some point, A-Yuan had fallen asleep against his waist, and despite the glare Wen Qing sent his way Wei Wuxian had pulled A-Yuan into his arms and carried him until they landed.

Jiang Fengmian waited until everyone landed, his eyes gently sweeping over Wei Wuxian before he led them into town and to an inn. They ate a quick dinner together and then Jiang Fengmian divided them into rooms for the night.

Thankfully, he gave Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan their own room. Wei Wuxian tucked A-Yuan into bed then made his way to Wen Qing's room and slipped inside, placing a silencing charm on the door before anyone saw him.

In hindsight, he probably should've warned Wen Qing he was coming in.

She was kneeling in her sleeping robes before a small table in the room, her hair undone as she pulled a comb through the strands. She startled when Wei Wuxian entered, her needles flashing into her hand. When she realized who he was she huffed, putting her needles away while Wei Wuxian coughed and looked away.

"You've seen me in worse conditions, don't pretend to be modest now," she said as she braided her hair. "Now get over here and take off your robes."

"So forward, Qing-jie! I'm an engaged man!" Wei Wuxian whined as he knelt in front of Wen Qing, and she glared and pulled several satchels from her sleeves. Not wanting to test her patience, Wei Wuxian chuckled and loosened his belt, pulling off his outer robes.

"You shouldn't have carried A-Yuan," Wen Qing scolded as Wei Wuxian continued removing his robes, slipping his under robes from his shoulders to pool around his waist.

"I didn't want to worry him," Wei Wuxian replied, wincing when he got to his inner robes and tried to pull them from his shoulders. Wen Qing brushed his hands away, moving behind him and gently tugging his inner robes from his shoulders to reveal the sodden bandages underneath.

"Anyone else could have carried him."

Wen Qing clicked her tongue when she saw the state of Wei Wuxian's back, and she continued to reprimand him as she worked to unravel the blood-soaked bandages.

Since the proposal had been announced, Wei Wuxian had managed to avoid Madam Yu's punishments until two nights ago, when he'd been messing around with Jiang Cheng and several other disciples.

They had been having a fun time, drinking and skipping rocks off the docks until Madam Yu's voice had cut sharply into the night, reprimanding them before she grabbed Wei Wuxian and dragged him away.

That night, she'd whipped him with zidian until blood ran down his back in rivulets.

The Lan didn't drink alcohol, after all.

The next day, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were forced to kneel in the ancestral hall as punishment, and they'd spent hours trading insults about the Lans until they had been released.

"Ah!" Wei Wuxian hissed, flinching when Wen Qing pulled off a bandage stuck to his lower back. Wen Qing swore and quickly pressed a clean bandage to his back, stopping him from squirming.

"Be gentle Qing-jie, this fox is fragile," Wei Wuxian quipped as sweat beaded on his forehead. Wen Qing only pressed harder, the pain intensifying before she stopped and drew a wet cloth against his back, skimming gently past the lash marks.

"Gentle is not in that woman's vocabulary," Wen Qing muttered as she cleaned his back. "Jiang Wanyin had to *carry* you to the medical pavilion this time. The only reason you're able to travel is because your cultivation level is high enough to stop excessive bleeding."

Wei Wuxian winced at her words, then startled when Wen Qing started spreading a cold paste onto his back, the smell of strong herbs flooding his nose.

"There's no use dwelling on it, I'll be fine by the time we reach Gusu."

"Not if you keep carrying A-Yuan."

"But—"

"No," Wen Qing interrupted, pausing in her ministrations until Wei Wuxian glanced over his shoulder and met her gaze. "I will tell Jiang Wanyin you're not fully healed if you try to carry A-Yuan again," she threatened.

"Fine, fine, you win."

Wen Qing huffed in satisfaction and finished applying the medicine. She wrapped new bandages around his back then sent him to his room with a stern glare and a reminder to sleep on his stomach.

Wei Wuxian slipped toward his room, then paused when he neared his door. Jiang Cheng was leaning against it with his arms crossed. *Why was he…?*

Jiang Cheng startled when he saw Wei Wuxian then stepped away from the door, closing the distance between them.

“Did Liu Qing look at your back?” Jiang Cheng brusquely asked, his eyes flickering to Wei Wuxian’s neck where the bandages peeked out from his robes.

“She did. Says I’ll be fine by the time we reach Gusu.”

“Good. You should’ve let me carry Wei Yuan,” Jiang Cheng added with a scowl, lightly smacking Wei Wuxian’s arm.

Wei Wuxian groaned, slumping forward with a whine. “Not you too!” *He wasn’t* actually *fragile.*

“Idiot.” Jiang Cheng smirked before his face fell and he sighed, reaching into his sleeves and pulling out a small box.

“Here,” Jiang Cheng said, his ears flicking back. “You should have this.”

Confused, Wei Wuxian took the box and flipped it open, his breath catching.

Inside, his Jiang clarity bell sat nestled within the box’s lining.

Wei Wuxian snapped his gaze to Jiang Cheng. “How did you—”

“It wasn’t hers to take,” Jiang Cheng quickly said, his eyes flicking to the floor. Wei Wuxian swallowed past the thickness rising in his throat, brushing a hand over the bell. Madam Yu had asked him to return it before he married into the Lan, and he’d forced himself to untie it from his belt and drop it into her hands without reacting.

He hadn’t expected to see it again.

“…Thank you,” Wei Wuxian eventually whispered.

“It’s nothing. Just don’t let them…don’t let the Lan…” Jiang Cheng stopped with a frustrated sound, scuffing his foot on the ground and lashing his tail.

“You’d better write,” Jiang Cheng finally managed. “At least once a month!” He added, and Wei Wuxian grinned. “If you don’t I’m coming to the palace and dragging you home.”

“Ah, shidi, I’ll miss you too,” Wei Wuxian sniffled, reaching forward to hug Jiang Cheng. Jiang Cheng hissed and dodged his arms, slapping his hands away.

“Your back is a mess!” Jiang Cheng snapped, his face turning red. Wei Wuxian whined and reached for him again, chasing him for several moments until Jiang Cheng cornered him against his door.

“Just…*Stop,*” Jiang Cheng said in exasperation while Wei Wuxian cackled.

“Alright. But don’t try to sneak into my room if you miss me during the night,” Wei Wuxian said and then dodged when Jiang Cheng tried to hit him in retaliation. Smirking, Wei Wuxian slipped into his room and closed the door, listening to Jiang Cheng’s footsteps until he couldn’t hear them anymore.

In the resulting silence, Wei Wuxian wilted against the door and clenched his fists. He shivered for several moments, adjusting to the pain before he circulated his spiritual energy toward healing his back.

Once he steadied himself and the pain had started to dull, he changed into his sleeping robes. He held his clarity bell in his hand, using his spiritual energy to stop the chime as he rolled it back and forth in his palm. Shaking himself, he dropped his clarity bell into a qiankun pouch.

Wei Wuxian then slipped into bed with A-Yuan, shuffling him to the side as he settled on his stomach. With a wave of his hand, Wei Wuxian doused the candles in the room and forced himself to sleep.

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Under Wen Qing’s watch, Wei Wuxian didn’t carry A-Yuan in his arms for the remainder of the trip. Instead, whenever A-Yuan started to nod off, Wei Wuxian passed him to Jiang Cheng, who grumbled but looked secretly pleased to be given the job.

By the time Jiang Fengmian directed everyone to land outside the palace city, Caiyi, the whip marks on Wei Wuxian’s back had scarred over and stopped bleeding.

They stepped off their swords in the late afternoon on the day before the wedding, and Wei Wuxian was glad for his heavier robes when he felt a sharp chill in the air. A-Yuan was asleep in Jiang Cheng’s arms, and Jiang Cheng absently wrapped his tail around him to keep him warm.

“Be mindful everyone, the Lan dragons should be expecting us at the palace gates,” Jiang Fengmian reminded them. “Remember that their sect rules apply once we enter the palace gates” he added with a glance at Wei Wuxian, who nodded in response.

Madam Yu had drilled this information into him, including where he wouldn’t be welcome if they returned him to Lotus Pier.

With her warning in mind, Wei Wuxian straightened his posture and tucked his usual smile behind a neutral expression. He took a steadying breath then reached toward Jiang Cheng to take A-Yuan. Jiang Cheng scowled and turned away, barking a short *“No.”* before he strode after his father.

Beside Wei Wuxian, Wen Qing laughed.

Wei Wuxian glared at her then followed Jiang Cheng, staying by his side as Jiang Fengmian led them into Caiyi.

Despite the afternoon hour, the residents of Caiyi bustled throughout the city, vendors bartering their wares and fishermen maneuvering through the canals. Much like the Lan, everyone in Caiyi openly displayed their features, ears and tails moving freely as people moved about. It reminded Wei Wuxian of Lotus Pier, except the vendors' calls were gentle and lilting instead of crisp and loud.

At first, no one paid them any attention.

And then slowly, like a wave rippling across water, people realized who they were and quickly moved out of their way.

No one cheered. No one clapped. No children pulled on their parents' robes in excitement.

Instead, the streets were eerily calm as they headed toward the palace. Vendors gave them wary looks and several people pointedly looked away when Wei Wuxian passed. Jiang Cheng scowled at those people, and Wei Wuxian wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

A rock clattered in front of Wei Wuxian and he turned to see a small child glaring at him from the side of the road and lifting another rock. Before he could throw it, however, a young woman rushed over and pulled the child away, scolding him as she bowed repeatedly in apology.

"Tch," Jiang Cheng clicked his tongue, setting down a now awake A-Yuan and stepping toward the woman before Jiang Fengmian stopped him.

"Do not punish them for their worries," Jiang Fengmian gently said. "There is little harm in their fear and the Lan will not let it fester."

Jiang Cheng grumbled, his ears flicking back, but he continued without further comment. In the silence, Wei Wuxian reached for A-Yuan's hand.

Wei Wuxian couldn't blame the townspeople for their reaction. *No one wanted to welcome a huli jing.* Not into their royal family, and especially not through a marriage with their precious Hanguang-jun.

When they reached the palace entrance Wei Wuxian slowed to a stop, his gaze catching on the imposing gates flanked by several Lan cultivators. The gate itself was large, ornate, and surrounded by stone walls covered in elegant writing, words spelling out the Lan rules for as far as Wei Wuxian could see.

A-Yuan tugged on his hand and Wei Wuxian steadied himself, breathing deeply before he continued. In front of him, Jiang Cheng had paused with a frown, looking from Wei Wuxian to the gates and back. Wei Wuxian shook his head in response, and Jiang Cheng huffed before approaching the awaiting Lans.

The cultivators guarding the palace gates were stoic and calm, their robes and horns tinted red from the setting sun. Around them, the Lan wards shimmered in the afternoon light and radiated enough energy that Wei Wuxian faintly wondered if the guards were even necessary.

Then he remembered that the Wen had gotten through the wards during the war, and had almost burned the palace to the ground.

The guards were likely *very* necessary.

Lan Qiren stood at the front of the gates with his hands clasped behind his back, his expression neutral as they approached. When they stopped, Jiang Fengmian traded greetings with Lan Qiren and Wei Wuxian bowed alongside Jiang Cheng.

Pleasantries completed; Lan Qiren looked behind Jiang Fengmian with a furrowed brow.

“Will anyone else be joining you?”

“Rest assured, this is everyone,” Jiang Fengmian replied with a pleasant smile. Lan Qiren stroked his beard before he glanced at Wei Wuxian, staring for several moments before he huffed and turned back to Jiang Fengmian.

“Very well then. I will lead you to where you’ll be staying.” Lan Qiren waved them through the wards and into the palace.

Unsettled, Wei Wuxian held tightly to A-Yuan’s hand and stayed beside Jiang Cheng as they followed Lan Qiren inside.

Wei Wuxian hadn’t heard much about the Cloud Recesses, and Madam Yu hadn’t provided much information past the basic palace layout. The Lans weren’t necessarily secretive, but after the siege they had significantly restricted who could enter the palace grounds.

Only a few outside cultivators had been allowed inside the palace once it was rebuilt, and these cultivators were notoriously tight-lipped about it. Rumor had it that the palace must be opulent and expansive, as fit for a dragon’s abode.

Instead, although the palace grounds were indeed large, most of the buildings were modest and minimally ornamented. The pathways were cleanly laid, and white stone lingered between buildings surrounded by well-kept gardens. Cultivators and palace assistants scurried back and forth, carrying books and scrolls and talking quietly to one another as they went about their duties.

“As you are aware, we have prepared several guest rooms for you,” Lan Qiren explained as he led them through the palace, his posture stiff and regal. “May I assume that she,” Lan Qiren glanced at Wen Qing, “will require her own room?”

“This one is Liu Qing; Wei Wuxian’s doctor.” Wen Qing bowed. “I would be satisfied if I may be introduced to the palace healers before being led to a room.”

Lan Qiren’s eyes widened, his steps pausing briefly.

“Your request will be granted,” Lan Qiren slowly replied. “I’m sure our healers will be happy to welcome you.”

Lan Qiren bid them to wait while he signaled for one of the passing Lan disciples. He spoke to them for several moments before the disciple nodded and bowed to Wen Qing, asking her to follow him to the healing wing.

Wen Qing looked at Wei Wuxian, seeming to make sure he wasn't going to do anything stupid while she was away before she nodded to herself and followed after the Lan disciple.

Jiang Cheng snorted and Wei Wuxian covertly elbowed him in the side, keeping his expression neutral when Lan Qiren glanced their way. They both held still until Lan Qiren resumed walking, after which Jiang Cheng cursed Wei Wuxian under his breath.

"You mentioned everyone is here, but should we expect your belongings to arrive later?" Lan Qiren asked as they walked. Jiang Cheng grimaced and Jiang Fengmian raised his hand, shaking his head.

"We thank you for your consideration, but we brought everything we need."

Lan Qiren didn't look convinced, but thankfully the older dragon didn't question them further, and they continued on quietly for several minutes.

A-Yuan stared at every building they passed, his head tipped back and eyes wide, mouth parted in silent awe. Wei Wuxian was tempted to do the same, but he reigned in his curiosity.

It wouldn't be proper to stare. Or to explore every building they passed. Or to let his son run through the pathways while he chased him in the evening sun.

You must behave properly.

Wei Wuxian shivered and pushed away Madam Yu's words.

They eventually reached a series of interconnected buildings, and Lan Qiren led them inside past several guards to where he explained the guestrooms were. They arrived at the rooms meant for Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Cheng first, and Wei Wuxian murmured a respectful parting that made Jiang Cheng scowl.

Before his brother could say anything though, Lan Qiren echoed Wei Wuxian's parting and continued deeper into the building. Wei Wuxian stuck his tongue out at Jiang Cheng, then darted to catch up to Lan Qiren, pulling A-Yuan along before Jiang Cheng could react.

It was exceedingly awkward to walk beside Lan Qiren when they caught up. The dragon still had his hands clasped behind his back, and he kept his gaze on the path before him, not sparing Wei Wuxian a glance.

They continued without speaking, Wei Wuxian growing more and more fidgety, the feeling of insects crawling under his skin as he forced himself not to break the silence.

"I must apologize," Lan Qiren said after several minutes of silence and Wei Wuxian startled, tightening his grip on A-Yuan's hand. Lan Qiren caught his confused expression and pursed his lips. "We expected you to bring your own servants, so we've only assigned you one of our own."

Wei Wuxian stumbled, his head snapping toward Lan Qiren. His *what?*

"Although that appears not to be the case." Lan Qiren frowned. "We can provide more servants, but there are only so many willing to work for a *huli jing*."

"I don't need any servants," Wei Wuxian quickly said, his neutral mask falling away.

Lan Qiren scoffed, pausing in the middle of the hall. "If you mean to insinuate our servants are not—"

"You misunderstand," Wei Wuxian interjected, then winced when Lan Qiren furrowed his brow. Wei Wuxian remembered to school his expression before he continued. "I didn't bring any servants because I don't need any. I'm sure the Lan servants are diligent and well-trained, but I'll be alright without them."

"The crown prince's spouse must have at least one attendant working for him. I will not have my nephew's reputation be further sullied because it looks like we do not care for his spouse." Lan Qiren stroked his beard. "We will send him to you in the morning."

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to protest when Lan Qiren continued.

"You will *not* harm him. Nor use your…*wiles* to convince him to break palace rules for you," Lan Qiren warned with a stern look. Wei Wuxian flushed, letting go of A-Yuan's hand to clench his fists.

"If he is harmed, we will not hesitate to punish you as deemed fit by our sect rules."

Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth, ignoring the impulse to punch Lan Qiren in the face.

"I understand," Wei Wuxian replied after several moments, somehow managing to keep his tone polite. Lan Qiren didn't look convinced, but he didn't threaten him further. Instead, he resumed walking until they stopped in front of a pair of guards standing outside a set of doors. The guards opened the doors for them, and they stepped into what looked like a small guestroom.

Unsurprisingly, the guestroom was sparsely decorated. Wei Wuxian could see a nondescript bed in one corner, and a low table and privacy screen in another. As Wei Wuxian looked around, Lan Qiren cleared his throat.

"You will stay here until the wedding ceremony tomorrow, and we ask that you refrain from wandering before the ceremony. We will move your belongings to your permanent residence afterwards," Lan Qiren explained. "A servant will arrive shortly with your dinner, and if you require anything else before tomorrow, you may ask the guards posted outside your room."

"Now then, unless you have any further questions, I'll take your son to the nursery," Lan Qiren added, and both Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan stiffened.

"The nursery?" Wei Wuxian questioned.

"Yes. Your son will be well looked after, rest assured."

A-Yuan's breath hitched in the quiet room and Lan Qiren frowned, glancing at him.

"There is no need to be concerned. There are many children your age who live there, and you will make friends quickly, as children do." A-Yuan dug his hands into Wei Wuxian's robes and Lan Qiren turned to Wei Wuxian with a beseeching look.

Wei Wuxian quickly swept A-Yuan into his arms, not caring that the movement pulled at his back. "Why would my son live in the nursery?"

"All Lan children live there, provided their parents reside within the palace," Lan Qiren explained. "It is where our teachers reside and the children receive their education."

"I can take care of my son myself," Wei Wuxian countered, narrowing his eyes as he tightened his grip around A-Yuan.

"Your ability is not in question." Lan Qiren looked slightly baffled by the argument they were having. "Our rules dictate that—"

"I don't care what your rules dictate. He is my *son*, and you will not take him from me," Wei Wuxian snarled, not caring how it looked. Lan Qiren's mouth clicked shut and he stiffened, his face turning red.

"We are not—" Lan Qiren started, before he abruptly cut himself off and let out a deep sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I suppose…we could make an exception," he begrudgingly said. "However, even if Wei Yuan lives with you, he will be required to attend lessons in the nursery and he may not disrupt your duties."

"That sounds reasonable to me," Wei Wuxian replied, relaxing his hostile stance. "If there is nothing else we need to discuss, my son and I should retire for the evening. We've had a long trip."

Lan Qiren looked like he wanted to say more, but he dipped his head and stepped toward the door. "We will discuss your duties further after the ceremony. If you will excuse me," Lan Qiren said then walked out. Wei Wuxian bowed and then quickly shut the doors to his room.

A-Yuan was shivering in his arms, and Wei Wuxian paced back and forth across the room, rubbing A-Yuan's back and promising him that no one would separate them until he started to calm down.

By the time a servant arrived with their dinner, A-Yuan had settled fully into Wei Wuxian's arms and was blinking sleepily. The servant hastily set down a tray of various dishes and rice before they quickly bowed and left the room.

You couldn't trust a huli jing, after all.

Wei Wuxian sighed and gently prodded A-Yuan, asking him if he was hungry. A-Yuan yawned and rubbed his eyes, but nodded in response. Wei Wuxian set A-Yuan beside the table then knelt before it himself, quickly filling a bowl for A-Yuan before he filled his own.

Wei Wuxian hadn't yet started to eat when A-Yuan made a face, frowning at his bowl. Concerned, Wei Wuxian quickly took a bite of his own food, worried something was wrong with it.

Bland!

Wei Wuxian mirrored A-Yuan's expression, then shook himself. *Surely it had to be a mistake?* The dish was primarily made from vegetables and looked well-prepared, but when Wei Wuxian took another bite, the taste didn't change.

Maybe the cooks had forgotten to season this dish in particular? Shaking his head, Wei Wuxian quickly reached for a pickled dish, took a bite, then let out a frustrated whine.

"Baba…" A-Yuan started, staring at his food with a pout. Wei Wuxian forced himself to swallow the bite he'd taken, chasing it with tea before he replied.

"I'm sure they simply forgot the spice tonight. But food is food, and we should be grateful to eat it."

A-Yuan looked unconvinced, but he nodded and continued eating without further complaint. Wei Wuxian stared at his own food, partially tempted to seek out the kitchens and pester them for spices. He'd pour his own spices into the dish, but he hadn't thought he'd need to pack any jars alongside his belongings in his qiankun pouches.

When A-Yuan wasn't looking Wei Wuxian grimaced at his food, pushing it around with his chopsticks and taking small bites. He was used to eating whatever he needed to survive, but his appetite vanished after several bites and he eventually gave up trying to force the bland food down his throat.

A-Yuan had finished his own bowl, at least, and Wei Wuxian quickly scooped him away from the table before A-Yuan could notice his unfinished portion.

"Time to sleep, little radish, "Wei Wuxian said, and it was a testament to how tired A-Yuan was that he didn't protest, but merely sunk against Wei Wuxian's chest, his eyes slipping closed. After changing him into his sleeping robes, Wei Wuxian tucked A-Yuan into the far side of the bed and then sat at the low table, his body sagging with exhaustion.

He was marrying Hanguang-jun tomorrow.

Shuddering, Wei Wuxian wallowed for a while before he steadied himself and sat properly. He cleared their food bowls and stacked them to the side for a servant to collect later, then used a talisman to light a candle as night fell. He pulled a qiankun pouch from his sleeve, removing several pieces of talisman paper, a brush, and materials to grind ink.

And then he worked late into the night, bent over the table until the candle burned low and flickered out.

It didn't hurt to be prepared.

Chapter End Notes

Jiang Cheng is the best uncle and he absolutely knows it.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> The wedding was supposed to happen this chapter but things got too long so I had to divide this chapter into two.
>
> -flees-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wei Wuxian woke to the sound of something crashing on the floor.

He jerked awake and was on his feet in seconds, scrambling away from the table where he'd fallen asleep—*ow, his neck*—and throwing himself in front of the bed where A-Yuan was sleeping before he even registered what'd made the sound.

"I-I'm sorry!" Someone stammered, and Wei Wuxian blinked the sleep from his eyes to see a young teenager shaking near the door to his room, his eyes flicking from Wei Wuxian to the talismans strewn across the table. The boy was carrying what likely had been a breakfast tray, but a water dish had toppled to the floor and several more dishes quickly followed suit.

The boy flinched every time a dish fell, his expression horrified as he backed toward the door. Realizing there was no danger, Wei Wuxian relaxed his stance, glancing over his shoulder at A-Yuan. His son had startled awake and was rubbing his eyes, sleepily reaching out to him. Wei Wuxian rubbed his hand over A-Yuan's head, whispered a quick *"Go back to sleep, baobei."* before he looked back at the boy.

The boy had white ears and a long tail, both of which were covered in black dappled spots in a pattern Wei Wuxian didn't recognize. His ears were pressed against his head, however, and he was stammering a string of apologies as he pressed himself against the door.

Wei Wuxian sighed internally, then threw on his most disarming grin. "Aiya, no need to fret, little Lan!" He quipped, stepping toward the dropped dishes. As soon as he moved, however, the boy flinched and dropped to his knees, setting down the tray and reaching toward the broken dishes.

"I'm sorry, your highness! I didn't mean to, I just—" The boy rambled, pulling broken pieces into his hands, heedless of whether they nicked his fingers. "I-I was surprised, that your highness wasn't in bed."

And by the talismans, went unsaid as the boy kept looking at them like they would burst into flame at any moment.

Wei Wuxian stared at the boy, baffled, before he shook himself and knelt beside him. “Hey, it’s alright,” Wei Wuxian gently said, trying to reassure him. “You’re going to hurt…” Wei Wuxian trailed off when the boy refused to look at him, continuing to pick up broken pieces despite the small specks of blood coating his hands.

“A little spilt breakfast never hurt anyone,” Wei Wuxian added, then reached out and plucked the broken shards from the boy’s hands and piled them on the discarded breakfast tray. The boy winced, his hands shaking as he stared at Wei Wuxian with wide eyes.

“Breathe,” Wei Wuxian insisted, and waited until the boy did so before he beamed. “There you go. Let’s try this again, yeah? I’m Wei Wuxian, no need to address me so formally,” he laughed, brushing the remaining shards together with his sleeves and depositing them on the tray. He couldn’t do anything about the split food, but at least no one would further cut themselves.

Speaking of which.

“Let me see your hands.”

The boy baulked, leaning backwards before he flushed and waved his hands. “What? N-No, I’m fine, your highness!”

“Wei Wuxian,” Wei Wuxian insisted. “And you’re bleeding. I can’t have people thinking I hurt teenagers.”

The boy paused at that, staring for several moments before he shakily held out his hands. “I have to refer to you formally. You’re marrying Hanguang-jun, after all.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled, checking the boy’s hands before he stood and pulled the boy to his feet. “Fancy titles make me sound high and mighty when I’m just a simple fox. Now hold still,” he said. The boy nodded, waiting while Wei Wuxian rummaged around in his sleeves and pulled out a qiankun pouch with *‘Use this!’* embroidered on the font. Wen Qing had stared him dead in the eye when she’d given it to him, threatening him with her needles if he didn’t use it when needed.

Smirking at the memory, Wei Wuxian quickly pulled out a roll of bandages before he steered the boy to kneel beside the table. The boy followed but looked exceedingly uncomfortable, his eyes continuously straying toward the talismans.

“They’re for privacy,” Wei Wuxian sighed as he knelt beside him and pushed the talismans aside. Well, *most* of them were for privacy, but the boy didn’t need to know that.

Wei Wuxian reached for his hands again, waiting until the boy nodded before Wei Wuxian started wiping them clean. Wei Wuxian could feel the boy shivering as he bandaged the cuts across his fingers, and Wei Wuxian felt a wave of anger rush through him. *What had they told their servants about him, to make them this scared?*

Careful not to let his anger show lest he frighten the boy further, Wei Wuxian bit the inside of his cheek and worked silently until the boy’s hands were properly treated. It was only after

the boy's hands were fully wrapped that the boy broke the silence.

"…Master Wei?" The boy hesitantly asked, finally looking at Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian groaned, but nodded, his shoulders slumping. "Fine, fine. Call me whatever you want."

The boy quickly nodded, and they watched one another for several moments before the boy jumped, his ears perking.

"Ah! Forgive me, Master Wei," the boy blurted, fluttering his hands. "This one is Mo Xuanyu. I'll be the servant assigned to you in the Cloud Recesses," he added, finishing with a deep bow.

So the little Lan wasn't a Lan!

"Don't worry about it, I only bite servants sometimes." Wei Wuxian grinned, then cackled when Mo Xuanyu paled.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding!" Wei Wuxian laughed, and Mo Xuanyu hesitantly untensed before he stood and picked up the discarded tray.

"Ah, Master Wei…I will have to learn then," Mo Xuanyu slowly said, still looking partially worried. "I-I'll get you a new tray, sorry for the wait!"

And before Wei Wuxian could stop him, Mo Xuanyu hurried out of the room.

"What will I do with him?" Wei Wuxian sighed, resting his chin on his hand. He stared at the door for a while, his thoughts swirling as he wondered whether everyone in the palace was going to be frightened of him.

Not that they would ever see him, if he wasn't allowed to roam the palace.

Grimacing, Wei Wuxian stood and cleaned up the talismans scattered around the table, sorting them into piles and tucking them into several qiankun pouches.

By the time Mo Xuanyu returned with a new breakfast tray, Wei Wuxian had managed to pester the guards for rags to clean up the spilt food, and was currently playing around with A-Yuan on the floor. Due to the early hour, A-Yuan was still only partially awake and he rolled around on the floor while Wei Wuxian playfully chased him, dragging bedsheets behind him as he went.

Wei Wuxian had caught A-Yuan and pulled him into his lap when Mo Xuanyu opened the door and stepped inside, and it was hilarious—albeit frustrating—to watch Mo Xuanyu freeze on the door's threshold.

"M-Master Wei?" Mo Xuanyu hesitantly asked, his eyes flickering to A-Yuan. Wei Wuxian grinned, pulling the sheets from A-Yuan and depositing him on the floor. A-Yuan whined, laying on the floor with his arms and legs splayed before he seemed to realize someone new had entered the room.

As soon as he did, A-Yuan scrambled to his feet and ducked behind Wei Wuxian, peeking out from behind his shoulder.

“Baba, who’s that?”

“That’s Mo Xuanyu, little one. He’s going to be helping us while we’re here,” Wei Wuxian explained, delighting in the way that Mo Xuanyu and A-Yuan warily stared at one another from across the room.

Thankfully, Mo Xuanyu seemed to remember himself after several seconds and properly stepped into the room, bowing to A-Yuan.

“Hello, Young Master Wei. It’s nice to meet—” Mo Xuanyu started and then stopped, because A-Yuan had darted around Wei Wuxian and grabbed Mo Xuanyu’s tail. Mo Xuanyu blinked, staring down at A-Yuan as his face slowly turned red before he frantically looked at Wei Wuxian for help.

Wei Wuxian was currently no help.

He was rolling around on the floor laughing and holding his stomach.

“Baba, it’s soft!” A-Yuan excitedly chirped, gripping Mo Xuanyu’s tail tighter. Poor Mo Xuanyu let out a squeak, desperately calling Wei Wuxian’s name.

Wei Wuxian laughed some more before he took pity on Mo Xuanyu. Wiping tears from his eyes, he rolled to his feet and walked toward Mo Xuanyu and A-Yuan before giving A-Yuan a stern look.

“Wei Yuan, what have Xian-gege and Qing-jie told you about touching other people’s features without their permission?” Wei Wuxian asked, watching as his son slowly furrowed his brow and flexed his grip on Mo Xuanyu’s tail. Mo Xuanyu looked similarly confused, mouthing *“Xian-gege?”* under his breath.

A slow look of realization crossed over A-Yuan’s face and he frowned, looking from Mo Xuanyu to Wei Wuxian and back.

“But baba, he’s pretty!”

Wei Wuxian snorted, then reached out and laid a hand on A-Yuan’s head. “Just because he’s pretty doesn’t give you permission to touch.”

A-Yuan had the gall to pout at him and Wei Wuxian wheezed another laugh, failing to hold his stern look. Meanwhile, Mo Xuanyu’s face was still red as he half-heatedly tried and failed to tug his tail free.

“Wei Yuan,” Wei Wuxian repeated, and A-Yuan relented and released Mo Xuanyu’s tail. A-Yuan slumped into Wei Wuxian’s legs and Wei Wuxian easily picked him up, settling him on his hip.

“What do you say to Mo Xuanyu?” Wei Wuxian prompted, and A-Yuan turned his large eyes to Mo Xuanyu, who had wrapped his tail tightly around his legs, still carrying the breakfast tray.

“M’sorry,” A-Yuan mumbled, and Wei Wuxian lamented the fact that his son looked too adorable to properly punish. Mo Xuanyu nodded and then moved to set the breakfast tray on the table.

“T-Thank you, Young Master Wei,” Mo Xuanyu stammered as he gestured for them to sit and eat. Wei Wuxian carried A-Yuan to the table and knelt down, then sat A-Yuan beside him. Wei Wuxian automatically filled a bowl for A-Yuan while Mo Xuanyu poured tea. The congee looked simple and without any spices, but Wei Wuxian assumed it might taste better than it looked, so he served himself and dutifully took a bite.

Still bland!

Wei Wuxian blanched, then forced himself to take another bite. *Maybe it had something to do with Lan wedding rituals?* Whatever the reason, A-Yuan looked displeased as well, but continued eating when Wei Wuxian gave him a pointed look.

“Is it not to your liking?” Mo Xuanyu asked when he passed Wei Wuxian his tea, and Wei Wuxian forced himself to shake his head.

“It’s fine, its fine,” Wei Wuxian insisted, smiling through another bite and swallowing before he could gag. Mo Xuanyu didn’t look convinced, and Wei Wuxian quickly tried to distract him.

“Mo Xuanyu, what type of spirit are you?” Wei Wuxian asked, and A-Yuan looked up in interest with his cheeks full of food. Mo Xuanyu blinked in surprise, pausing in passing A-Yuan tea before he seemed to realize that Wei Wuxian was sincerely asking.

“Ah, Master Wei, I’m a snow leopard,” Mo Xuanyu replied and then furrowed his brow. “Have you not heard the stories?”

“About you? No, but I have been fighting in a war for the past several years,” Wei Wuxian chuckled, waving away Mo Xuanyu’s concerned look. “I was just curious, nothing more.”

“You’re very pretty,” A-Yuan added as he paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth. Mo Xuanyu blushed, and then they both watched as the congee on A-Yuan’s spoon slowly fell onto the table with a *plop.*

A-Yuan whined while Wei Wuxian laughed, and Wei Wuxian waved Mo Xuanyu away when he tried to clean up the mess. Wei Wuxian was used to cleaning up after his son, and he did it quickly, reminding A-Yuan to pay attention to his food as he ate.

A-Yuan finished his meal while Wei Wuxian forced himself to finish his own, and then they all paused when someone knocked on the door. Mo Xuanyu headed to the door quickly, sliding it open.

Wei Wuxian gaped at the person standing in the doorway, trying not to laugh.

The horns protruding from their head marked them as a true Lan, as did their snow white and blue robes, but that was where the resemblance ended. Unlike Lan Qiren and the other Lan cultivators Wei Wuxian had seen, this Lan's entire appearance was in disarray.

Their long hair appeared to have been pulled back at some point, but half of it was falling from their hair ribbon. Their robes were in a similarly disheveled state, several layers overlapping improperly and their belts crooked. Bright colors marked the edges of their sleeves, and there were several wet patches on their one shoulder.

The only part of them that wasn't messy was, somehow, their forehead ribbon.

Mo Xuanyu didn't seem concerned about how they looked, and despite their appearance, they smiled brightly when Mo Xuanyu opened the door and bowed toward Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan.

"It is nice to meet you, your highness," they said, their voice surprisingly gentle. "And you as well, Young Master Wei," they added. A-Yuan stared for several moments then looked at Wei Wuxian with a small frown.

"Baba, who are they?"

Before Wei Wuxian could respond, the Lan let out a soft laugh and dipped their head. "This one is Lan Mingshan, and I am the caretaker of the palace nursery. I'm here to help you get ready for the ceremony so your baba can get ready himself," they explained.

A-Yuan didn't look convinced and clung to Wei Wuxian's robes. Considering that Mo Xuanyu had nodded along with Lan Mingshan's words, Wei Wuxian was inclined to believe what the Lan said. He ruffled A-Yuan's hair, nudging him forward.

"It's okay, A-Yuan. I'll see you later today during the ceremony," Wei Wuxian reassured him, and A-Yuan hesitantly released his robes. He still didn't look convinced, and then Lan Mingshan bent down, holding out their hand.

"If you come with me, there are several children your age who would be happy to meet you," Lan Mingshan said. "They won't be playing their games for much longer though, so if you'd like to join them we have to head there quickly."

A-Yuan perked up when Lan Mingshan mentioned games and he bounced on his feet, looking between Wei Wuxian and Lan Mingshan. Wei Wuxian chuckled and waved A-Yuan onwards.

"Go on, little radish. I'll see you soon," he said and A-Yuan bobbed his head, dashing forwards and grabbing Lan Mingshan's hand. Lan Mingshan smiled, then nodded to Wei Wuxian and Mo Xuanyu before they left.

Wei Wuxian resisted the urge to rush after his son as soon as they were out of sight, and thankfully Mo Xuanyu started to speak, pulling Wei Wuxian's attention.

“If Master Wei doesn’t mind, this one will fetch water for a bath so you may begin getting ready.” Mo Xuanyu bowed and Wei Wuxian pulled him up, shaking his head.

“You really don’t need to be so formal,” Wei Wuxian started, and then changed tactics when it looked like Mo Xuanyu was going to protest. “At least not when we’re alone, okay?”

Wei Wuxian grinned when Mo Xuanyu hesitantly nodded, and he quickly waved Mo Xuanyu from the room to fetch water.

When Mo Xuanyu left, Wei Wuxian went about preparing himself for the day, his grin disappearing as he pulled out several qiankun pouches and set them on the table. From these he removed layer after layer of his wedding robes, trying not to think too hard about what was going to happen later.

He was getting married. To Hanguang-jun.

Fuck.

Wei Wuxian swallowed several curses as he shook out his wedding robes. While he worked, Mo Xuanyu returned and started filling the tub on the far side of the room. By the time the bath was ready, Wei Wuxian had finished taking out his entire wedding outfit.

“They’re beautiful,” Mo Xuanyu said, breaking the silence and Wei Wuxian half-heartedly laughed, turning away from the robes.

“Is the water ready?”

Mo Xuanyu nodded, then flushed and looked away.

“D-Do you require assistance with your bath?” Mo Xuanyu stuttered, refusing to meet Wei Wuxian’s eyes. Wei Wuxian frowned and waved a hand.

“I’ll be alright by myself, don’t worry.”

Mo Xuanyu wilted in clear relief and stepped away from the privacy screen blocking the bath. Wei Wuxian almost questioned him about it, then shook his head and stepped behind the privacy screen, pulling it securely in front of the bath.

Not every man was used to seeing another naked, and it wasn’t like Wei Wuxian wanted Mo Xuanyu to see his back anyways.

Wei Wuxian stripped and tied up his hair, quickly stepping into the bath and sinking into the water with a groan. The hot water did wonders for his aching back, and relaxed his muscles that’d become kinked from falling asleep at the table the night before.

When Wei Wuxian managed to pull himself from the bath, he could hear Mo Xuanyu puttering around the room. At some point, Mo Xuanyu had left a fresh towel and a set of underrobes beside the privacy screen. Wei Wuxian dried himself and slipped on the robes, then stepped around the privacy screen when the door opened and several people walked inside.

Wei Wuxian stared in confusion before he remembered he wasn't fully dressed and shot Mo Xuanyu a questioning look. *Who were they?*

Mo Xuanyu blinked, seemed to realize the issue, then frantically fluttered his hands. "Oh! Master Wei, there's no need for alarm," he quickly said, gesturing toward the Lans. "They're supposed to be here!"

The Lans in question bowed and introduced themselves as palace doctors, and the head doctor at the front of their group stepped forward with a smile.

"We're here to make sure his highness is in good health before the ceremony," he explained as he set down a doctor's bag on the table and several of the doctors behind him followed suit.

"I can assure you, I'm perfectly healthy," Wei Wuxian replied and the head doctor looked up in surprise.

"I believe you, your highness, but we need to check regardless. If you come over and remove your robes, it shouldn't take long."

Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath, clutching the front of his robes. He didn't particularly mind doctors, but if they saw the whip marks on his back…

Damaged goods.

"What are you even looking for?" He asked, taking a step backwards toward the privacy screen. The head doctor paused, furrowing his brow, and several doctors shifted behind him.

"Nothing unusual, we promise. We're merely following standard procedures to—"

"No," Wei Wuxian said, taking another step back. The head doctor's expression shifted from confusion to concern and he stepped toward Wei Wuxian.

"Your highness, if you are trying to hide an injury, we must examine it. We need to make sure you're healthy," he said as he crossed the room. Wei Wuxian continued edging backwards and then stumbled when he bumped into the privacy screen and it tipped over behind him, crashing loudly to the ground.

The screen landed partially in the bath and sloshed water onto the floor, and the doctors rushed toward Wei Wuxian, their faces full of concern.

When the first doctor reached him Wei Wuxian panicked—*they couldn't see his back*—and he knocked them out based on instinct alone, their body crumpling to the floor.

There was a moment of silence, then the room erupted into chaos.

Wei Wuxian slipped past doctors and darted around the room, dodging hands and hissing at anyone who got too close. At some point the guards heard the commotion and entered the room as well, quickly joining the doctors in their attempts to catch Wei Wuxian.

He couldn't hurt them.

He'd already knocked one out, and if he hurt anyone else they *might kick him out before the wedding even happened.*

Wei Wuxian rolled underneath a guard's arms, his gaze catching on the open door to the room. He quickly sprung to his feet, headless of his robes as he sprinted toward the door.

He'd almost reached it when a guard appeared in front of him and grabbed his arm, yanking him to the side. Desperate, Wei Wuxian bit down on the guard's arm—*don't draw blood*—and the guard released him with a pained shout.

As soon as he let go Wei Wuxian continued toward the door, unsure what he'd do if he reached it. It wasn't like he knew his way around the palace, and the Jiang contingent was staying far enough away that Wei Wuxian wasn't sure if he could even find them.

Regardless, Wei Wuxian pushed himself forward, his instincts telling him to run. When he finally stepped through the door, he was trying to decide which direction to go when someone slammed into his back and tackled him to the ground.

Wei Wuxian landed hard, his vision wavering before he started squirming in their grasp, clawing at their arms. They held on tightly though, pinning him against the floor until several others ran over and helped pin him down.

As Wei Wuxian struggled, the hands holding him pressed harder, and his robes started to slip from his shoulders. *They couldn't see.* Wei Wuxian desperately gasped, frantically trying to pull himself free.

"What is going on here?"

A familiar voice demanded and everyone froze.

Panting, Wei Wuxian looked up to see Lan Qiren—of all people—standing above him. Beside him stood Wen Qing, her face twisted in rage.

In the silence, Wei Wuxian surged upwards and yanked himself free, clutching his robes as he distanced himself from the people who had been holding him down. As soon as he moved, however, the guards and doctors started shouting, several of them reaching for him.

"Master Lan, he started attacking us!"

"Out of nowhere! We were just trying to—"

"The damn fox *bit* me!"

"Quiet!" Lan Qiren snapped, and they immediately closed their mouths.

"You, explain what is going on here," Lan Qiren demanded, his gaze landing on Mo Xuanyu. Wei Wuxian hadn't noticed Mo Xuanyu standing near the door, and Mo Xuanyu cowered under Lan Qiren's look.

“T-The doctors were trying to examine his highness’s health. He declined their examination, but they insisted on continuing and it resulted in this,” Mo Xuanyu stuttered, minutely shaking. Lan Qiren grimaced, turning toward Wei Wuxian.

“Is this true?”

“Yes, Lan-xiansheng.” Wei Wuxian forced his voice not to waver as he retied his robes, sending glares at the doctors and guards.

“Why didn’t you listen to him?” Wen Qing asked as she stepped past Lan Qiren, ignoring Lan Qiren’s surprised look. He didn’t silence her, however, and Wen Qing took that as permission to approach the doctors.

“If he told you he didn’t want to be examined, why did you try and force him?”

“Force him? He’s not some maiden—!” One of the doctors protested, then cowered when Wen Qing glared. In the tense silence the head doctor stepped forward, his brow creased.

“Doctor Liu, we only wanted to ascertain his health.”

Wen Qing scoffed. “What exactly were you trying to find out that you couldn’t ask me, his personal doctor, about?”

“Ah, well...such topics are sensitive, and we weren’t sure you would answer truthfully.”

“He has already had a child.”

Everyone flinched at Wen Qing’s words, including Lan Qiren, whose face slowly turned bright red. Wei Wuxian felt himself flush and he backed away further, his eyes darting to the side.

Not that her words were true, *but to say it so boldly!*

“Unless you wanted to know something more personal than his lack of chastity, I suggest you not force yourselves to—"

“That is enough,” Lan Qiren sternly interrupted. Wen Qing stepped back, her anger flickering when she seemed to realize where she was and who she was berating. She gritted her teeth and bowed, returning to Lan Qiren’s side as she sent Wei Wuxian a worried look. Wei Wuxian shook his head, trying to reassure her that he was alright.

Lan Qiren cleared his throat.

“If he did not consent to being examined, then his decision is final,” Lan Qiren said before he turned to Wen Qing. “As his doctor, I trust you will examine him and present a truthful account to your colleagues if given sufficient time?”

Wen Qing nodded, tactfully keeping her mouth shut. Satisfied, Lan Qiren turned back to the doctors and guards. “Then you are dismissed, and Doctor Liu will report to you before the

ceremony. I expect the rest of today to go smoothly and without further issues. Do I make myself clear?" Lan Qiren said, his eyes meeting Wei Wuxian's.

Wei Wuxian bowed, murmuring assent in tandem with the doctors and guards. Afterwards, the doctors scurried away and the guards left to retake their posts, and the doctor Wei Wuxian had knocked out stumbled into the hallway. He froze upon seeing Wei Wuxian, then quickly fled.

Lan Qiren watched everyone leave and then glanced over Wei Wuxian once more. Apparently satisfied, he huffed and left, his sleeves swishing as he vanished down the hall.

Wei Wuxian sighed in relief then shakily stepped back into the room.

Wen Qing and Mo Xuanyu followed him inside, and Wen Qing closed the door while Wei Wuxian sunk to the ground beside the table and buried his face and arms against it. He shivered as the adrenaline left him. *Stupid.*

"Wei Wuxian."

Wen Qing's voice was gentle, but Wei Wuxian didn't respond. He heard Wen Qing sigh and then felt her kneel next to him, her shoulders brushing his own.

"Wei Wuxian, you need to—"

"I'm sorry, Master Wei!" Mo Xuanyu blurted and Wei Wuxian lifted his head to see Mo Xuanyu prostrated on the ground before him, his tail curled around himself. Wei Wuxian sat up in alarm and frantically shuffled his way to Mo Xuanyu, pulling him up.

"Mo Xuanyu, what are you doing?" Wei Wuxian quickly asked. Mo Xuanyu shook before him, tears falling from his eyes and ears pressed against his head. Wei Wuxian sent Wen Qing a desperate look.

"I'm sorry!" Mo Xuanyu repeated, his voice hiccupping. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure whether he should wipe the tears from Mo Xuanyu's face, and before he could decide Mo Xuanyu's breath started to hitch.

As soon as it did, Wen Qing knelt beside Mo Xuanyu and gently gripped his wrist, sending him spiritual energy. "Wei Wuxian is not angry with you," Wen Qing calmly said, and Mo Xuanyu hiccupped and turned his eyes to Wei Wuxian.

"Doctor Liu is right, I'm not angry," Wei Wuxian reassured him, pasting on a smile. Mo Xuanyu sniffled and wiped his eyes, his ears lifting.

"But I didn't mean to…I didn't think…," Mo Xuanyu started and stopped, and Wei Wuxian waved a hand.

"No harm was done and it was not your fault. Why don't you clean yourself up while Liu Qing looks me over?" Wei Wuxian said as he stood, pulling Mo Xuanyu with him. Mo Xuanyu looked like he wanted to protest but he nodded and then glanced around the room.

Wei Wuxian followed his gaze and winced. The privacy screen was in the bath, water covering part of the floor, and the robes Wei Wuxian had laid out were strewn about. Several hairpins had also rolled from the bed to the floor, and lay scattered throughout the room.

“I’ll clean up, Master Wei,” Mo Xuanyu said, insisting on it when Wei Wuxian told him not to bother. Unable to stop him, Wei Wuxian watched Mo Xuanyu start cleaning as Wen Qing stepped past him and toward the fallen privacy screen.

“Come on then, let me look you over.”

Wei Wuxian followed Wen Qing and righted the privacy screen. They both stepped around it, avoiding the water from the bath as Wei Wuxian untied his robes. He slipped them off and tied them at his waist—she didn’t need to see everything—and Wen Qing began her examination.

Thankfully, Wei Wuxian had managed to avoid tearing open the newly-healed marks on his back during the scuffle, and Wen Qing sternly reminded him not to over exert himself in the following days.

Once she finished, Wen Qing told him to wait and stepped around the privacy screen, vanishing for several moments until she returned with a deep red underrobe.

“Here,” she said as she handed him the robes, looking him over once more. “Put this on and behave yourself. Mo Xuanyu will help you into the rest of your wedding robes, and I expect not to have to come running anytime soon.”

Wei Wuxian laughed and shook his head, and waited until she left to change into the red underrobes. Once he did, he stepped around the privacy screen and was surprised to see Mo Xuanyu had finished cleaning the room.

Mo Xuanyu was waiting near the rest of the wedding robes by the bed, and he jumped when he saw Wei Wuxian. “Ah, Master Wei, may I help you finish getting ready?”

Wei Wuxian paused, knowing that once he was fully dressed it would be time to head deeper into the palace for the ceremony.

For him to marry Hanguang-jun.

“Let’s make me presentable,” Wei Wuxian joked, plastering on a smile. Mo Xuanyu beamed and lifted the next set of robes, and Wei Wuxian swallowed his nerves and crossed the room.

He could do this.

Chapter End Notes

I've written "poor Mo Xuanyu" fondly into my chapter notes several times and I should be sorry but I'm not.
Also if anyone's leaving comments I'll get to them eventually but I'm way too nervous to look yet. TuT

Extra
wwx: ok cool cool I can do this no chaos
also wwx, after knocking out a doctor: well shit

lqr, softly in the background: what have I done to deserve this

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Ahahah here's the wedding I run now.
-flees-

See end notes for a minor content warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure he could do this.

The morning had gone by quickly, and he soon found himself standing outside the hall where the ceremony would take place, waiting for the guards to gesture him inside.

Wei Wuxian was dressed in the finest robes he’d ever worn, heavy silk pulling his shoulders toward the ground. Layers and layers of red and gold tethered him to what was about to happen, and if they were any darker red, it’d look like he was bleeding while draped in gold finery, a war general dripping blood while he walked to his sentencing.

Wei Wuxian watched the guards through a thick veil of red, his head lowered as a bride’s should be on such an occasion, but Wei Wuxian couldn’t see more than the hazy forms of the dragons standing near the door.

He could see enough though, to notice when the guards opened the door and gestured for him to enter.

Wei Wuxian hesitated, then lifted his head and walked inside, his movements light and practiced so he didn’t trip over the heavy robes. As he moved, the ornaments and pins hanging from his hair softly chimed, and he tried to focus on the quiet sounds instead of the pounding of his heart.

He couldn’t see the people filling the room, but he could tell where the Jiang sect sat from the splash of purple coloring his veil; a sharp contrast to the white from the Lans sitting across from them. Jiang Cheng had to be scowling, and Wei Wuxian almost laughed at the absurdity of the situation.

In the middle of the room, Hanguang-jun waited for him.

Presumably.

Wei Wuxian couldn’t see the man properly due to the veil, but he was the only person in the hall draped in red and gold beside Wei Wuxian himself. Hanguang-jun stood tall as he waited for Wei Wuxian, his posture stiff and regal and his horns stretching gracefully from his head.

He turned to face Wei Wuxian when he drew near, and Wei Wuxian abruptly wanted to tear the veil away.

Because he couldn't see the man he was marrying, but everyone could see him.

The *huli jing. Dirtying the Lan with this marriage.*

Wei Wuxian's steps faltered as a rush of anger rolled over him and he breathed in a shaky breath, forcing himself to keep walking.

Within moments he was beside Hanguang-jun, and the man that was to be his husband held out a hand. Wei Wuxian steadied himself and returned the gesture, letting his hand rest gently in Hanguang-jun's.

Hanguang-jun's hand was coarse and textured, and Wei Wuxian felt calloses brushing against his own; hands worn from use and war.

And hands that didn't want to touch his own, judging from the slightest tremor he felt from Hanguang-jun when Wei Wuxian slotted their palms together.

Hanguang-jun minutely shifted until their hands were barely touching. Wei Wuxian momentarily tried to place his hand more firmly into Hanguang-jun's, but the man merely adjusted his own until they were back to barely touching.

Wei Wuxian felt his resolve crumble. His eyes dropped to the floor and the world around him slowly turned red and hazy.

Hanguang-jun didn't acknowledge him; didn't say a word, didn't do anything more than start moving toward the other end of the hall, pulling Wei Wuxian with a barely-there touch. Which meant that Wei Wuxian wouldn't know what Hanguang-jun looked or sounded like before he married him.

Ha.

Shijie, he couldn't do this.

By the time they reached Lan Qiren at the end of the hall Wei Wuxian was drifting, and when Hanguang-jun dropped his hand the faint warmth keeping him somewhat grounded vanished. He could hear what sounded like Lan Qiren speaking, but the words dripped in one ear and out the next.

Wei Wuxian dimly registered time passing, his body going through the motions mechanically; pouring tea and bowing and holding still when someone wrapped something soft around his wrist. Shapes and people blurred before him, and then between one moment and the next Wei Wuxian breathed in the smell of food, the soft sound of conversations flowing into his ears.

They had moved into a banquet hall, and Wei Wuxian startled when someone gently set several plates of food before him. Wei Wuxian blinked, turned his head to the side, and watched Hanguang-jun through his veil.

Hanguang-jun knelt beside him, but he didn't look at Wei Wuxian as he finished handing him food before turning to procure his own. Instead, he was calm and quiet as he served himself and began eating without delay.

Wei Wuxian stared at the dishes before him, his stomach churning.

The dishes looked as unappealing as the other meals he'd been served and he clenched his hands in his lap. Not wanting to cause trouble, he slowly picked up his chopsticks and lifted some food towards his mouth. As soon as the bland smell reached him, however, his stomach rolled and he abruptly pulled the food away, swallowing the bile filling his throat.

Wei Wuxian returned the food to his bowl and set his chopsticks down, then waited for the meal to end.

As the banquet continued, groups of people started approaching their table and offering congratulations. Their words flowed over him, not registering, but Hanguang-jun must have been responding because each group left after several moments, satisfied and calling well-wishes.

It wasn't until much later that Hanguang-jun finished eating and pushed himself to his feet. Wei Wuxian assumed it was time for them to leave and he stood, swaying slightly. His feet had gone numb during the meal, and he had to steady himself as the feeling of needles pricked his feet.

Hanguang-jun waited for him to get his bearings before he turned and left, likely expecting Wei Wuxian to follow.

And follow he did.

Wei Wuxian didn't speak while Hanguang-jun led him through the palace, not wanting to disturb the fragile silence between them. They walked for several minutes until they reached a set of rooms Wei Wuxian assumed were Hanguang-jun's, based on the guards protecting the doors. The guards straightened when they saw Hanguang-jun, then opened the doors and stepped aside without comment.

Wei Wuxian followed Hanguang-jun into what appeared to be several interconnected rooms that were as minimally ornamented as the rest of the palace.

It wasn't until the guards shut the doors that a clear sense of finality settled over Wei Wuxian.

They were married.

Wei Wuxian stopped in the middle of the main room, unmoving, while Hanguang-jun continued walking. He stepped through an open door and paused, turning toward Wei Wuxian and silently waiting until Wei Wuxian jerked into motion and followed him.

They stepped into what appeared to be Hanguang-jun's bedroom and Wei Wuxian stopped when Hanguang-jun did, hesitant to intrude on his space, especially when he couldn't make out Hanguang-jun's expression through the veil.

They stared quietly at one another until Hanguang-jun turned away.

“You may remove your veil.”

Hanguang-jun’s voice was softer than Wei Wuxian expected, deep and mellow and it took Wei Wuxian several seconds to realize Hanguang-jun was talking to *him*. When he did he startled, nervously laughing as he lifted the veil from his face.

The laughter died in Wei Wuxian’s throat when he finally saw Hanguang-jun.

Hanguang-jun was slightly taller than Wei Wuxian and he looked elegant in his wedding robes, patterns of longevity and cloud motifs intricately stitched in gold throughout. His features were a clear contrast to his robes; white horns tipped in the softest blue, and a smattering of white and blue scales dusted across his face and brow. His tail was long, white with blue edges much like his horns. His expression was completely neutral, the softest jade in color and look, and Wei Wuxian easily understood why he’d been ranked in the top three most eligible bachelors before the war.

Wei Wuxian lifted his gaze and then held his breath when he met Hanguang-jun’s eyes. They were lighter than any he’d seen before, gold like clover honey with dark flecks scattered throughout. Wei Wuxian stared until he realized Hanguang-jun was staring back, and then he tore his gaze away, clearing his throat and urging the flush to leave his face.

“Ah, I…um…” Wei Wuxian started then trailed off, not knowing what to say. Hanguang-jun hadn’t spoken any further, and it wasn’t like Wei Wuxian could simply wander around the room, poking his nose into everything. This room wasn’t his, and if Hanguang-jun wasn’t speaking then it probably meant he was waiting for Wei Wuxian to…

“I assume we should change into something more suitable?” Wei Wuxian finally managed, flicking his gaze to Hanguang-jun. The dragon’s expression didn’t change, but he did faintly nod.

“Mn. You may use the folding screen,” Hanguang-jun said, glancing at a screen across the room before he turned away. Wei Wuxian shakily nodded in response, cursed himself when he realized Hanguang-jun wouldn’t see, and then quickly fled behind the screen.

Wei Wuxian’s hands shook as he looked around, unable to find any sleeping robes he could change into. *Of course there would be no robes. They wouldn’t need them in order to—*

Wei Wuxian shivered and mechanically started peeling off his wedding robes. In an effort to prolong the inevitable, he took his time with each layer, pulling each one off and folding it properly. The entire time, however, he couldn’t stop his thoughts from racing ahead and imagining what he’d have to do next.

A wedding wasn’t a wedding without the wedding night, after all.

And what better way to solidify Hanguang-jun’s hold over Wei Wuxian, than to tether Wei Wuxian to himself in such a way?

He could only hope that it wouldn't be too painful as Wen Qing's warnings swirled in his mind.

After the engagement had been confirmed, Wei Wuxian had spent a harrowing afternoon with Wen Qing as she explained the intricate details of marital duties between men and how to best prepare himself. Wei Wuxian had been mortified the entire time, mainly because although he joked about birthing A-Yuan, he hadn't actually ever done more than flirt with pretty men and women.

And there Wen Qing had been, telling him how to pleasure a man.

Thoroughly, and in great detail.

Wei Wuxian had thought his face would stay red forever by the time Wen Qing had finished, and then Wen Qing had pulled out a small jar and handed it to Wei Wuxian, her expression deadly serious.

"You will use this when needed," she threatened, and Wei Wuxian could only mutely nod and accept the jar. He hadn't needed to look inside to know it was full of oil, to ease the way for *that* kind of bedroom behavior.

"And if he hurts you, I don't care that he's the crown prince. I'll cut his dick off."

"Qing-jie!"

"You think I'm not serious? I am. I will cut it *off,*" Wen Qing hissed and Wei Wuxian had wanted to die on the spot. Wen Qing talking about bedroom matters was bad enough, but threatening to remove a man's…*it was too much!*

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure what had happened after that, but as he stood in only his inner robes, all he could think about was that he'd forgotten to hide the jar of oil within the sleeves of his wedding robes.

Wei Wuxian stared at the floor for several moments, his breathing ragged as he tried to convince himself that Hanguang-jun would be gentle. That surely he had his own oil for these matters, and that he'd use it on Wei Wuxian.

Or maybe he'd use it on himself?

Wei Wuxian briefly tried to picture the dragon taking the submissive role and abruptly shook his head, his face flaming.

The purpose of this marriage was to subdue Wei Wuxian, which meant his role in these matters was likely for him to be on the receiving end.

It was at this point, standing in the bedroom of the crown prince, that Wei Wuxian realized if he removed his final layer, he wouldn't be able to hide his back from Hanguang-jun. His breath stuttered and he clutched his robes, dread washing over him.

As soon as Hanguang-jun saw the scars, he'd likely toss Wei Wuxian from his rooms and demand the Jiang provide an undamaged partner. Not that Wei Wuxian could see the dragon demanding anything considering he'd barely heard him speak, but he could have the guards drag Wei Wuxian from his room and throw him where everyone could see how defective he was.

Maybe he could leave his robes on?

Hanguang-jun probably wasn't happy about bedding a *huli jing*, so he might not mind if Wei Wuxian kept himself somewhat covered. Or perhaps Wei Wuxian could have Hanguang-jun take him from the front, keeping his back pressed against the bed—

"Wei Wuxian?"

Wei Wuxian flinched at the sound of Hanguang-jun's voice. *It was now or never.* Deciding to try his luck in keeping his inner robes on, Wei Wuxian steeled himself and stepped around the screen, letting out a playful laugh.

"Impatient, aren't we?" Wei Wuxian quipped, then promptly choked on his own words.

Because Hanguang-jun stood near the bed, watching him with the slightest crease in his brow.

Fully clothed. In sleeping robes.

Wei Wuxian felt heat rushing to his face and he stared, frozen as he waited for the dragon to react. The crease between Hanguang-jun's eyes grew, and he glanced over Wei Wuxian, his gaze stopping just above his head.

"Aren't we going to…" Wei Wuxian spoke, breaking the silence but unable to force himself to fully ask the question. Hanguang-jun looked confused, and he tilted his head at Wei Wuxian.

"Clothe yourself properly."

They were going to fuck with all their clothes on?!

"Wouldn't so many layers make things more difficult?" Wei Wuxian blurted before he could stop himself. Mortified, he forced himself to stand his ground, his face flaming. Hanguang-jun blinked, looking from the bed to Wei Wuxian.

"I do not follow."

"It's just that, how would it work? Not that I mind a keeping one layer on but…"

Hanguang-jun's expression grew increasingly more perplexed.

"I mean, I'm sure Hanguang-jun is great and all, but surely even he couldn't take it out through all those layers and put it to use," Wei Wuxian babbled, unable to stop digging his own grave.

“This fox spirit also forgot his own oil.”

Hanguang-jun’s expression cleared for a brief moment before he seemed to register what Wei Wuxian was suggesting. Then Hanguang-jun’s eyes widened and he stepped back as if struck, his ears turning red.

Dead. Wei Wuxian was *dead. Hanguang-jun was going to kill him.*

“You—!”

Hanguang-jun’s mouth opened and closed, but no further words came out. He glared at Wei Wuxian, his hands clenching before he suddenly turned to face the bed, his head bowed and shoulders minutely shaking.

“Do you not have sleeping robes?”

Wei Wuxian stared at Hanguang-jun’s back, not entirely sure why Hanguang-jun was asking. Did he care that much about having clothes for after they did it? Or was he mad that Wei Wuxian had forgotten his own oil?

Unsure how to respond, Wei Wuxian answered truthfully.

“I do, but they’re with my belongings,” Wei Wuxian explained, holding still when Hanguang-jun glanced at him over his shoulder. “Which are not, you know, here. Which means that no, I do not have sleeping robes.”

Hanguang-jun’s expression minutely twitched, then he strode across the room to a cabinet. He pulled out a set of light blue sleeping robes and thrust them at Wei Wuxian.

“Clothe yourself properly,” Hanguang-jun repeated, keeping his eyes averted.

Wei Wuxian accepted the robes and slipped them on without speaking, and it wasn’t until he’d tied them that the tension slipped from Hanguang-jun’s shoulders.

“Aren’t we going to…?” Wei Wuxian asked. Hanguang-jun ignored his question and walked back to the bed, lifting the covers and slipping underneath.

“It is time to sleep.”

Hanguang-jun doused the candles in the room with a wave of his hand then laid down and folded his hands over his stomach, adopting the pose of a corpse as he actually closed his eyes as if to sleep. When Wei Wuxian didn’t move to join him, Hanguang-jun opened his eyes and glared.

“Sleep,” Hanguang-jun insisted, and Wei Wuxian scrambled into bed, trying to calm his racing heart as he slipped in beside the dragon. He laid on his back and pulled the covers over himself, holding as still as possible as he tried not to accidentally touch Hanguang-jun, or worse, his tail.

When Wei Wuxian chanced a look at Hanguang-jun, his eyes were already closed again, and Wei Wuxian laid in the silence, baffled.

The marriage wouldn't be valid if they didn't do more than *literally* sleep together, right?

Granted, it was possible that the Lans didn't care because Wei Wuxian already had a child, but it was also possible that Hanguang-jun simply didn't want to sleep with a *huli jing.*

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure which option was worse.

He felt his eyes grow hot with frustrated tears and he quickly turned on his side, careful not to pull the covers as he moved to the edge of the bed and curled into himself, as far away from Hanguang-jun as possible.

Hanguang-jun didn't move, and Wei Wuxian listened as his breathing settled into the steady pattern of someone already asleep.

Thoughts spinning, Wei Wuxian dug his hands into the bed, trying and failing to sleep. He hadn't expected Hanguang-jun to like him, but he'd hoped that they might at least get along amicably and make the best of the situation. He couldn't get past the thought that Hanguang-jun—*his husband*—already hated him, at least enough not to touch him on their wedding night.

Which meant that he was already one step closer to being thrown from the palace, and the thought of being sent away with A-Yuan, forced to face Madam Yu's wrath or wander the streets was enough make his tears spill over and onto the bedding.

***

At some point during the night, Wei Wuxian must've fallen asleep, because one moment he was staring into the darkness and the next he woke to the sound of someone knocking and calling his name.

Wei Wuxian pushed himself into a sitting position, rubbing sleep and dried tears from his eyes before he realized the bed was empty and cold beside him. He'd never felt Hanguang-jun leave, and Wei Wuxian didn't see him when he glanced around the room.

Really, he shouldn't be surprised he woke up alone.

Someone called his name again and Wei Wuxian rasped a response, pushing himself to stand as the main door slid open. Wei Wuxian walked into the main room to find Mo Xuanyu setting down a tray at a low table. Mo Xuanyu straightened when he saw Wei Wuxian, dipping a short bow before he blinked and started blushing.

"Master Wei! I didn't realize you were…" Mo Xuanyu trailed off, his face turning a deeper red. "This servant apologizes for not making sure you were decent!"

Wei Wuxian knew he'd slept terribly and likely looked a mess, but he couldn't make heads or tails of Mo Xuanyu's reaction. He glanced down at his robes, confirmed that they hadn't become untied during the night, then let out a groan and knelt next to the table.

“What are you talking about?”

Mo Xuanyu squeaked and knelt across from him, hurriedly moving to serve him breakfast and tea.

“N-Nothing! Please don’t worry about it. Master Wei may dress however he pleases.”

Deciding it was entirely too early to think too deeply about these things, Wei Wuxian nodded then accepted the tea Mo Xuanyu handed him, letting the warmth seep from the cup and into his hands. Mo Xuanyu quickly set a bowl of congee in front of Wei Wuxian, then folded his hands into his lap, watching Wei Wuxian carefully.

The congee looked plain and unappetizing, and Wei Wuxian must have made a face because Mo Xuanyu frowned, his hands fluttering.

“D-Does Master Wei not like congee?” Mo Xuanyu hesitantly asked, his ears flicking back.

“It’s not that I don’t like it, but…are there any spices?” Wei Wuxian asked. Surely the Lan wouldn't penalize him for asking for food that wouldn’t make his stomach turn, although he quickly reconsidered his question when a small furrow grew between Mo Xuanyu’s eyes.

“Ah, never mind. If it’s a problem, don’t worry about it,” Wei Wuxian quipped as he lifted a spoonful of congee and took a bite. Somehow, this congee was *worse* than the stuff he’d had before, and it took everything in his power to keep a smile on his face as he swallowed.

At least the tea was good, and he used it to chase the tasteless congee, not caring when the tea burned his tongue.

“It’s no problem, really!” Mo Xuanyu blurted, looking like he wanted to take back the offensive congee before he wilted and let his hands fall to his lap. “It’s just that, I am not sure there are any spices in the kitchens.”

No spices? At all? How did the Lan survive—

“There’s no rule against them, but I’ve never seen any and I’m not sure where I’d go to find them?” Mo Xuanyu continued, and Wei Wuxian resigned himself to eating the bland congee until he could leave the palace and find something better.

Well. *If* he was allowed to leave the palace.

The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth and he quickly downed the rest of his tea, pushing the congee away.

“Pretend I didn’t ask,” Wei Wuxian said then glanced around, confirming that Hanguang-jun wasn’t behind the privacy screen nor in the room.

“When did Hanguang-jun leave?” Wei Wuxian asked and Mo Xuanyu’s ears perked as his eyes lit up.

“His highness gets up at five every morning, so he has already left to see to his usual duties. He told me to allow you to sleep in, and to show you to your permanent quarters before you’re required to attend your own lessons,” Mo Xuanyu explained, looking proud that he’d remembered all the appropriate information.

Wei Wuxian frowned before he could stop himself.

“I won’t be staying here?”

Mo Xuanyu flushed, his eyes going wide before he quickly looked away.

“I…that is. Um,” he nervously swallowed, hunching his shoulders. “Master Wei, of course, is allowed to spend t-time here if his highness so wishes, but Lan custom often dictates spouses have their own quarters, especially when they have children.”

Ah. Right. Why would Hanguang-jun want to see Wei Wuxian any more than he had to?

Wei Wuxian pushed himself to his feet, glancing down at his sleeping robes before he headed toward the cabinet in the other room.

“We might as well get going then, wouldn’t want me to be late for whatever lessons this place has planned for me,” Wei Wuxian called over his shoulder, ignoring Mo Xuanyu’s surprised spluttering. Instead, Wei Wuxian opened the cabinet and looked inside, skimming past the numerous snow-white robes to a set of robes of the deepest blue. They looked shorter than the other robes and barely worn, and Wei Wuxian didn’t pause before he pulled them out.

It wasn’t like he could wander the palace in sleeping robes, and it didn’t look like Mo Xuanyu had brought any robes with him.

If Hanguang-jun minded Wei Wuxian stealing a set of robes, he could’ve had the forethought to have Wei Wuxian’s belongings brought over the day before. Especially if he hadn’t planned on bedding him.

Instead, Wei Wuxian had to wake up like a discarded lover, clutching sleeping robes to hide their night as he slunk back to his own quarters. Wei Wuxian yanked on the deep blue robes and hastily tied them, not taking time to fix his hair or make sure the robes laid properly.

It wasn’t like Wei Wuxian had any face to save in the palace, so who cared what he looked like when walking back to his quarters? Wei Wuxian would make sure he was presentable later before his lessons, but no one should fault him now for returning in such a state.

And if Hanguang-jun wanted his robes back, he could seek out the husband he’d so easily dismissed.

Wei Wuxian strode back into the main room and toward the door, ignoring Mo Xuanyu’s wide eyes when he saw his robes.

“I’m ready to leave,” Wei Wuxian said when he reached the door. “Might as well show me where I’ll be staying.”

Mo Xuanyu stared for several moments, his mouth hanging open. It wasn’t until Wei Wuxian started to open the door that Mo Xuanyu jolted into motion, calling for Wei Wuxian to wait. Wei Wuxian paused in the doorway, and then followed after Mo Xuanyu when he slipped past and headed deeper into the palace.

Chapter End Notes

Content warning: Wei Wuxian believes he's going to be forced into nonconsensual sexual behavior. He's completely wrong about this and no non-con actually happens.

Also for real I promise I'll start reading comments this time if there are any. Rip me.

Extra:
LQR: be careful because wwx will try to seduce you with his wiles
MXY: -nodding- Got it! I'll be fine!!!
WWX: -runs around in inner robes and Hanguang-jun's sleeping robes-
MXY: ok maybe I don't got this

(Don't worry, no seducing of MXY will happen in this fic. We'll just pray for MXY bc he has to deal with this shit)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> This chapter also ended up being too long so I had to split it in two. This might be a running theme. Alaksjdas.
>
> -flees-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wei Wuxian followed Mo Xuanyu across the palace, keeping his head high as they passed servants and cultivators who watched him with wide eyes. He grinned when people met his gaze, watching them freeze or clutch their scrolls in surprise, and he tried not to cackle when one particularly small Lan skittered to the other side of the hall.

It wasn't until they made it halfway across the palace that Wei Wuxian realized wearing Hanguang-jun's robes might have been a bad idea.

The deeper they went into the palace's residential area, the more everyone's looks turned from fear to outright anger, people openly glaring and lashing their tails. As the glares grew more hostile, Mo Xuanyu started walking closer to Wei Wuxian's side, almost hiding behind his sleeves as he kept his gaze trained on the ground.

Wei Wuxian was about to question Mo Xuanyu when a scoff came from a group of female servants walking past them in the opposite direction. The woman who'd made the noise held Wei Wuxian's gaze when he looked, then spoke loudly to the rest of the group.

"No wonder they gave him *those* quarters. Less than two days and the *huli jing* thinks he's good enough to wear his highness's robes."

The women tittered, and Wei Wuxian took a step towards them with vague thoughts of flaunting Hanguang-jun's robes. Before he could, however, he felt a tug on the edge of his sleeves.

He turned to see Mo Xuanyu gripping his robes, trembling slightly as he stared at the ground.

"D-Don't mind them, your highness," Mo Xuanyu stuttered, tugging Wei Wuxian away from the women. Wei Wuxian furrowed his brow, starting to protest that he didn't need to be coddled, that a few stray words from palace servants didn't matter, when the women laughed again, covering their mouths with their sleeves.

Mo Xuanyu tugged on Wei Wuxian's robes again, and Wei Wuxian bit his tongue and followed Mo Xuanyu. The women weren't worth his time, and it wasn't like they could do

anything to him. Because what were they going to do, get him thrown out for wearing his husband's clothes?

Wei Wuxian's steps faltered and he tripped over his robes, stumbling slightly into Mo Xuanyu as gooseflesh prickled over his skin.

He could be breaking a rule.

The Lan were notorious for their proper dress, rumored to have rules dictating even the smallest of things, such as the number of ornaments gracing their belts. Which meant that Wei Wuxian could be breaking a rule with his appearance, and they very well *could* throw him out.

Wei Wuxian sucked in a shaky breath, confidence dripping down his spine as he tensed and let his eyes drop to the ground. Mo Xuanyu seemed to sense Wei Wuxian's changed mood, and he quickly led Wei Wuxian to a small collection of buildings tucked into the far corner of the palace grounds.

Thankfully there were few people this far into the palace grounds, and Wei Wuxian felt the tension draining from his shoulders when Mo Xuanyu indicated they'd arrived. The building they'd stopped in front of was small, and it didn't appear to be attached to any additional buildings.

Unlike the rest of the palace, the building was ornamented in intricate patterns; wooden flowers carved into various pillars, trails of blue coloring shining throughout, and a delicately painted sign hanging above the entrance. Wisteria trees framed the building as well, their branches climbing the walls and roofs in sprawling masses of dangling purple flowers.

The building was beautiful and much nicer than he'd been expecting, and he almost thought he wouldn't mind staying there when he realized there were guards stationed in front of the doors.

A huli jing was dangerous, after all.

Wei Wuxian eyed the guards as Mo Xuanyu led him across the door's threshold. The guards didn't move as they walked by, and Wei Wuxian was tempted to poke the one closest to himself, just to see if they'd react.

He wasn't prepared to feel the warm shimmer of barrier wards flutter around him as they stepped inside.

The wards were strong, heavy like the ones he'd felt when he entered the palace, and he paused as soon as he was inside, looking over his shoulder to see the wards shimmer faintly in the space between the doors.

And then the guards closed the doors and the wards vanished from sight.

Swallowing the nerves cresting in his chest, Wei Wuxian hurried after Mo Xuanyu.

Mo Xuanyu led Wei Wuxian down an ornate hallway and to a set of doors inlaid with flowers and blue stones. There were guards stationed at these doors as well, and Mo Xuanyu bowed to the guards when they reached them before turning and smiling at Wei Wuxian.

“We’re here, your highness.”

Wei Wuxian bit his tongue to stop himself from correcting Mo Xuanyu’s address, his eyes flickering to the guards. They nodded at Mo Xuanyu but ignored Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian averted his gaze as the guards opened the doors and gestured them inside.

Wei Wuxian followed Mo Xuanyu inside, his eyes widening as he took in the room.

The walls were covered in blue ornamentation, flowers carved into the windows and painted across several doors that opened into additional rooms. In one corner a low table stood, surrounded by ornate cushions. There was also a desk stacked with paper and brushes; cinnabar and grinding tools littered across its surface.

And the *bed.*

Wei Wuxian wasn’t one who typically cared where he slept, as long as it was safe and warm and preferably not on the streets in the middle of winter. But this bed looked fit for a royal spouse; large and covered in thick sheets with cushions and pillows aligned at one end.

Wei Wuxian felt a sudden urge to dive onto the bed and burrow into the blankets, his ears and tails eager to be free.

“Master Wei?”

Wei Wuxian jumped, having forgotten Mo Xuanyu was standing beside him. He shook away his thoughts with a laugh, smiling as he urged Mo Xuanyu to continue.

Mo Xuanyu showed him the bathroom and A-Yuan’s room before he led Wei Wuxian to what he said was his favorite part of the building. Mo Xuanyu almost bounced as they went, his ears perked and tail swaying as he slid open a door into a lush courtyard.

“This entire courtyard is surrounded by your rooms and the palace’s outer wall,” Mo Xuanyu chirped, stepping off the porch and onto the grass. “A caretaker keeps the grounds, but you may use this area as you see fit.”

The courtyard was as beautiful as the building itself. A sprawling trail meandered through soft grass toward a pond, and flowers covered the courtyard’s edges, interspersed between various trees. Wei Wuxian didn’t recognize the flowers, but their blue petals reflected the carvings he’d seen inside the rooms.

In the quiet space of the courtyard, Wei Wuxian abruptly realized it was *too much.*

Too nice. Too well-crafted for a spouse Hanguang-jun didn’t even want, let alone a *huli jing.*

He didn’t belong here.

“Master Wei?”

Wei Wuxian jolted, shaking away his thoughts.

“Don’t mind me.”

Mo Xuanyu frowned, and Wei Wuxian hurried inside, trying to divert his attention.

“You mentioned that my belongings were brought here?”

Mo Xuanyu lit up as he followed Wei Wuxian inside, his tail flicking as he nodded and gestured toward a large cabinet.

“We’ve hung your robes in there. We didn’t touch anything else, aside from removing some things from your qiankun pouches. I put your writing materials on the desk and moved everything else to the chest over there,” Mo Xuanyu explained.

“My talismans?” Wei Wuxian asked and Mo Xuanyu flushed, his ears twisting back.

“Ah, I um…this servant thought you might not want others to see them, and kept them within your qiankun pouch,” Mo Xuanyu stammered, pointing to a qiankun pouch on the desk.

Wei Wuxian sighed in relief, striding over and snatching the pouch to look inside. Reassured that everything was where it should be, Wei Wuxian turned to see Mo Xuanyu with his head ducked, his face a deep red.

“This one also apologizes, because he accidentally found…” Mo Xuanyu flushed a deeper red and bowed. Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue and walked back to Mo Xuanyu, gently pulling him up.

“What have I said about formalities?”

Mo Xuanyu winced, his eyes darting away. “This one knows, but I breeched Master Wei’s privacy. I saw…” Mo Xuanyu trailed off, sinking into himself. “I didn’t mean to go through your intimate belongings, I swear!”

Wei Wuxian tilted his head and waved away Mo Xuanyu’s concern.

“Aiya, we’re both men, aren’t we? Seeing my undergarments isn’t a big deal. It happened all the time during the war.”

Mo Xuanyu squeaked and closed his eyes, shaking his head. “It wasn’t your…” he trailed off, covering his face with his hands before he blurted out the rest of his words. “*Itwasyourbedroomintimatespleaseforgiveme!”*

Wei Wuxian frowned, taking a moment to pick apart Mo Xuanyu’s response. *Bedroom intimates?* What intimate belongings did he have, aside from his inner robes and undergarments? It wasn’t like he had any—

Wei Wuxian flushed when he realized what Mo Xuanyu had found, then let out a small whine as he bemoaned his luck.

The oil. Fuck.

Wei Wuxian scrubbed a hand over his face, urging the rush of heat in his cheeks to leave as he tried to ignore the fact that Mo Xuanyu knew he'd brought things to ease the way for bedroom activities.

"Thank you for letting me know, but let's pretend this never happened, alright?" Wei Wuxian asked, and was relieved to see Mo Xuanyu hurriedly bob his head in understanding.

Desperate to change the conversation, Wei Wuxian looked around again and realized he hadn't seen his sword.

"Mo Xuanyu, where did you place my sword?"

Mo Xuanyu blinked and tilted his head.

"Suibian? My spiritual sword?" Wei Wuxian prompted when Mo Xuanyu didn't respond, and the boy nervously pressed his hands together, looking away.

"Please forgive this one. I wasn't informed where they placed Master Wei's sword."

Wei Wuxian must've made a face, because Mo Xuanyu rushed to explain himself, bowing again before Wei Wuxian could stop him.

"I-I'm not an active cultivator anymore, so I don't know where they store everyone's spiritual swords!" He stammered. "Cultivators aren't allowed to carry their swords within the royal quarters, so they likely put your sword with everyone else's."

"What about Hanguang-jun? Does he carry his sword?" Wei Wuxian asked, vaguely remembering he'd seen Hanguang-jun's sword the night before.

Mo Xuanyu shifted uneasily on his feet.

"His highness may, but only because he was given permission by his majesty."

Considering the twin jades' notoriously close relationship, Wei Wuxian wasn't surprised that Hanguang-jun had permission to carry his sword.

"This one…can ask around about Master Wei's sword?" Mo Xuanyu asked and Wei Wuxian sighed, shaking his head.

"Don't worry about it if it's a palace rule," he replied, fighting down his nerves. Theoretically, he should be safe within the palace without it, but he didn't exactly trust the Lans to keep him or A-Yuan safe, and talismans could only do so much when someone was aiming for your throat.

“Okay…” Mo Xuanyu said, pausing before he glanced at the door. “I forgot to mention, but Young Master Wei is currently attending lessons in the nursery. He’ll return in the evening before Master Wei does, and this one will keep watch over him until your own lessons are finished,” Mo Xuanyu quietly added.

“Thank you for letting me know.” Wei Wuxian relaxed and scrubbed a hand over his face, then glanced at the bathroom. “I don’t suppose I have enough time to take a bath?”

“You do, Master Wei,” Mo Xuanyu chirped. “I’ll fetch hot water, and Master Wei may take his time before lessons start.” Mo Xuanyu quickly bowed then hurried from the room.

Wei Wuxian let his smile slip as soon as Mo Xuanyu left. He groaned, rubbing his eyes before he shook himself and knelt at his desk, pulling his qiankun pouch with his talismans toward him to properly take stock.

By the time Mo Xuanyu returned with enough bathwater, Wei Wuxian had unpacked his talismans and scattered them across the table. Crumpled papers littered the ground and ink stained his hands, and Mo Xuanyu called his name several times before he got Wei Wuxian’s attention.

Mo Xuanyu’s eyes flickered to the talismans, but he didn’t question Wei Wuxian about them. Instead, he gestured toward the bathroom and hesitatingly asked if Wei Wuxian needed assistance. Wei Wuxian declined, then strode into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Stepping into the hot water was blissful and it soothed his aching back. He melted into the tub and floated in the warmth and let himself *breathe.* When he finally stepped out of the bath sometime later, he felt somewhat ready to face his first day of lessons.

The lessons, Wei Wuxian quickly realized, were tedious and boring, and he faintly wondered if someone had purposefully assigned him these lessons to drive him mad. Because he couldn’t imagine why he needed to sit perfectly still for a shichen and listen to an elderly Lan lecture him on agriculture and trade routes, of all things.

Or the Lan rules, and in one particularly mind-numbing lesson, ancient Lan history and ancestry.

At least he’d been able to let his mind wander during the history lesson, because the Lan teaching it had never looked up from his books, his voice monotone and dull.

It was only mildly better than his music lesson, which instructed him on how to play the guqin. It was the only class he’d openly questioned being in, and the instructor—a severe-looking woman who reminded him of Madam Yu—had rapped his hands then spent the remainder of the lesson waxing poetic about the advantages to learning such a complex instrument.

He’d been quiet in his lessons after that.

Wei Wuxian was worn out by the time he walked into his final lesson with Lan Qiren, and he'd done little more than bow quietly and sit properly when their lesson began.

Lan Qiren, surprisingly, had been the only teacher to do no more than glance his way when Wei Wuxian entered, and he waited for Wei Wuxian to grid ink and open a notebook before he spent the next shichen detailing the minutia of court etiquette.

After the lesson ended Wei Wuxian stood, hesitating for a moment while Lan Qiren restacked the scrolls on his desk.

"Lan-xiansheng?"

Lan Qiren looked displeased when he met Wei Wuxian's gaze, and Wei Wuxian stiffened and quickly executed a proper bow.

"This one would like to inquire where his sword is."

Lan Qiren furrowed his brow, his displeasure evident before he huffed and picked up a few scrolls.

"Did Mo Xuanyu not tell you? It is in the armory outside the royal quarters. If you leave the palace it will be returned to you," Lan Qiren said, and Wei Wuxian carefully ducked his head and murmured thanks, keeping his gaze lowered before he quickly left the room.

He managed to keep his posture sharp, hands folded into his sleeves as he glided past servants and Lans despite the bubbling mix of anger and frustration rolling in his gut.

If you leave the palace.

"Ha!" Wei Wuxian wheezed, panic clawing its way under his skin. Because he wasn't allowed to roam the palace unless heading to lessons, let alone leave the palace freely. Which meant that unless he broke into the armory suibian was relegated to being little more than a fancy decoration.

A few passing servants jumped at his exclamation and Wei Wuxian bit his tongue, hurrying to his rooms before anyone could report him for misconduct.

If was an odd relief to pass through the wards into his quarters, and Wei Wuxian had barely opened the doors to his room when he was tackled by a small child.

"Baba!"

Warmth curled through Wei Wuxian's chest and he swung A-Yuan onto his hip, pulling him into a hug. He nuzzled his son's hair, breathing in his familiar scent until his muscles relaxed and his tension melted away.

"Welcome back, Master Wei."

Wei Wuxian lifted his head and saw Mo Xuanyu standing near the table. His tail was flicking lightly and he smiled as he set down a dinner tray on the table. Wei Wuxian greeted him in

return and walked over, holding A-Yuan close.

“Did my little radish behave today?” Wei Wuxian asked Mo Xuanyu, purposefully not looking at A-Yuan when he bobbed his head in reply.

“I-I think so?” Mo Xuanyu stammered as he prepared tea. A-Yuan wiggled in Wei Wuxian’s arms at that, slapping his hands against Wei Wuxian’s chest.

“Baba! I was good!” A-Yuan chirped and Wei Wuxian grinned, playfully tilting his head.

“Are you sure he was well-behaved, Mo Xuanyu? A-Yuan’s used to rough-housing with the little Jiang disciples,” Wei Wuxian said, giving Mo Xuanyu an encouraging look. Mo Xuanyu —bless him—blinked one, twice, then startled when he caught onto what Wei Wuxian was doing.

“Now that I think about it, Master Wei, this one heard that something might’ve happened…”

“I was good!” A-Yuan interjected, half-wailing and repeatedly smacking Wei Wuxian’s chest. Wei Wuxian bounced A-Yuan to his other hip and joined Mo Xuanyu by the table.

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound good, Mo Xuanyu. This fox spirit thinks that little boys who don’t follow the rules—”

“I did!”

“—might have to wait to eat their dinner!” Wei Wuxian continued, ignoring A-Yuan’s playful whining.

“Baba, no!”

A-Yuan slapped a hand against Wei Wuxian’s face and then went limp in his arms, noodling his way to the floor. As soon as he was on his own feet Wei Wuxian laughed and ruffled his hair, weak to the adorable pout his son was giving him.

“Aiya, *baobei*. No need to pout. You must’ve done very well today,” Wei Wuxian fondly said, and A-Yuan’s pout vanished within seconds. He giggled and hugged Wei Wuxian’s waist until Wei Wuxian shooed him to sit down to eat.

“Did Master Wei’s lessons go well too?” Mo Xuanyu asked as they all settled around the table. Wei Wuxian grimaced, automatically moving to serve A-Yuan to keep his hands occupied.

“I don’t think I broke any rules,” Wei Wuxian eventually said, narrowing his eyes as he remembered the teachers’ chilly reactions and hostile glares. Wei Wuxian finished doling himself and A-Yuan portions of a dish heavily laden with radish, and when Mo Xuanyu didn’t respond Wei Wuxian looked at him.

Mo Xuanyu was frowning, his expression twisted in confusion. But before Wei Wuxian could ask him what was wrong, Mo Xuanyu shook himself and mumbled that he was glad Wei Wuxian’s lessons had gone well.

As they started eating Wei Wuxian warily eyed his food. A-Yuan was eating it with apparent gusto, so perhaps they'd finally switched to something with flavor? Wei Wuxian tentatively lifted his chopsticks and took a bite then felt his eyes start to water. He blinked back tears and swallowed, repressing a shudder then quietly setting down his chopsticks.

At least the tea was decent, even if it was weaker than the blends he was used to. He chased away the taste in his mouth and poured himself another cup, then turned to A-Yuan and asked whether he'd made any friends in the nursery. A-Yuan's eyes lit up and he bobbed his head, eagerly babbling nonstop about the children he'd met and the games they'd played.

Wei Wuxian listened to A-Yuan ramble for the remainder of the meal, resting his hand in his hand and smiling fondly until A-Yuan abruptly frowned at Wei Wuxian's uneaten food.

"Baba?"

"Hm? What's wrong, my little radish?" Wei Wuxian quipped. Across from them Mo Xuanyu smiled, then hid his expression behind his tea.

"Baba didn't eat," A-Yuan stated and Wei Wuxian stilled. He carefully arranged his face into a smile and waved a hand.

"Don't worry about me, little one, I ate lots before dinner," he said, ignoring the confused look Mo Xuanyu sent his way. A-Yuan didn't look convinced, looking down at his own bowl before he looked back at Wei Wuxian.

"Baba's sure?"

"Baba's sure," Wei Wuxian replied, and felt a wave of relief when A-Yuan seemed mollified. Another moment and his son stood, tugging on Wei Wuxian's robes.

"Bath?" A-Yuan questioned, and Wei Wuxian nodded and glanced at Mo Xuanyu. Mo Xuanyu jumped, stammered that he'd get the bathwater ready, then quickly fled the room.

When the bath was ready Wei Wuxian whisked his son away, showering him in kisses and working through their usual nightly routine until A-Yuan was clean, dressed for bed, and fast asleep in Wei Wuxian's arms.

Mo Xuanyu offered to carry A-Yuan to his room but Wei Wuxian told him not to worry about it. He didn't want to let A-Yuan away from his side at night just yet, and so he sent Mo Xuanyu towards the teen's own quarters before Wei Wuxian tucked himself and A-Yuan into his own bed.

And then he laid in the darkness listening to A-Yuan's soft breaths, his thoughts spinning deep into the night.

Chapter End Notes

I'm just going to stop promising I'll be nice to MXY. Every time I try, something chaotic happens. Hope you enjoyed the last of the transition chapters! We'll get to see LWJ's pov next chapter I'm so excited ahhh.

Also, I promise the Lans have very good reasons behind everything they're doing; WWX's just really bad at reading their intentions. Which means things are gonna get a lot worse before they get better I'm s o r r y.

Extra:
MXY, staring at the jar of oil in WWX's things: -incoherent screaming-

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> Let it be known I've given up trying to keep to any sort of chapter length. This is a long one and it's my favorite chapter so far, so I'm throwing it at you early aksdjhas enjoy.
> -runs away-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week passed with little fanfare, the days slipping by slowly as his nerves started to fray.

Every day Wei Wuxian was escorted to his daily lessons that stretched until he wanted to throw his inkbrush across the room. His fingers hurt from guqin lessons, his mind hurt from memorizing the Lan rules, and his nerves skittered until he was practically crawling out of his skin.

It didn't help that Wei Wuxian hadn't seen Hanguang-jun since their wedding.

Not that Wei Wuxian expected to see his husband frequently—Hanguang-jun *was* the crown prince, after all—but he'd hoped that he might run into Hanguang-jun at least once. He had been looking forward to asking him to spar, to see the legendary Hanguang-jun's fighting skills in person, but Wei Wuxian's schedule was packed from the time Mo Xuanyu woke him at an ungodly hour till he dragged himself back to his rooms in the evening.

Wei Wuxian wasn't used to sticking to the same routine every day, let alone when he didn't have access to his sword to burn off his excess energy.

He'd never gone more than a few days without cultivating with his sword, and every night he tossed and turned when he tried to sleep, trying not to disturb A-Yuan as the need to do *something* gnawed on his nerves.

By the end of the week, the gnawing grew until his hands shook and he desperately threw himself from bed one night and wandered into the courtyard.

The palace was quiet at night, and with autumn fast approaching the night air was cold. Wei Wuxian pulled his sleeping robes tighter around himself as he stepped through the grass and looked at the night sky.

He didn't make it far before he sucked in a breath, biting back a whine that threatened to burst from his chest as he traced patterns around the thin shape of the moon.

His fingers twitched, aching for him to transform and run off the excess energy, something he hadn't done since he was a child. At Lotus Pier, he had made do with releasing his tails

within the privacy of his room, or by practicing his sword forms in the dead of night where no Jiang would find him.

But he couldn't let his tails free here, and his breathing quickened as his nerves bubbled into a chaotic frenzy. Desperate, Wei Wuxian jogged through the courtyard, ducking around bushes and trees as he searched for something he could use.

The grounds were well maintained, and Wei Wuxian reached the palace's walls that framed his courtyard without finding so much as a stray twig.

He whined in frustration as he stared at the walls, watching the palace wards rippling in the space above where they ended. The walls wouldn't have been hard to scale, but he had the uncanny feeling that the wards functioned like the palace's main entrance, in that they would lock him out if he left.

They had trapped him here.

Wei Wuxian abruptly slammed a fist into the wall, pain reverberating through his hand.

The pain grounded him, however, and he steadied his breathing and turned his eyes to the trees around him. There was nothing on the ground for him to work with, but he figured no one would notice if he plucked a suitable branch from a tree.

Shaking out his hand, Wei Wuxian scanned the trees in the courtyard, looking for one that suited his needs. He passed over several that were too tall to reach the lowest branches until he found one of medium height, its branches low enough for him to reach if he jumped. Wei Wuxian scoped out a branch and then jumped, wrapping his hands around the branch and then heaving with his full weight.

The branch broke with a satisfying *snap*.

Wei Wuxian winced at the sound, but landed lightly and glanced at the door to his room. He waited to hear if he'd woken Mo Xuanyu, and after several moments of silence he sighed in relief.

Curling his fingers around the branch felt solid in a way that settled his nerves, and he quickly stripped the branch of twigs and leaves, then broke it until it mirrored the length of his sword. Satisfied, Wei Wuxian walked back into the open area of the courtyard and let himself sink into the first stance of the Jiang sword forms.

The branch wasn't heavy, but it carried enough weight that Wei Wuxian only needed to adjust his balance slightly when he started moving through his forms.

As he practiced his nerves drained away, his mind going hazy as he worked the energy from under his skin until he was sweaty and exhausted. Until his muscles ached and his arms shook, and he felt like himself in a way that settled within him.

When Wei Wuxian finally stopped he grinned, basking in the chilly air brushing over his too-hot skin. He stayed there, breathing in the night and then went about hiding his makeshift

sword.

Wei Wuxian scouted the courtyard for the best location to hide his branch, and settled on tucking it underneath the building's entrance to the courtyard. Once he was sure no groundskeeper would find it, Wei Wuxian crept inside, moving behind the privacy screen as he pulled off his soiled sleeping robes.

He quickly wiped himself down with a wet washcloth, pulled on a new set of sleeping robes, and hastily braided his hair before he padded back to bed. A-Yuan had somehow managed to kick the blankets onto the floor, sprawling halfway across the bed in the process. Wei Wuxian let out a soft hum and picked the blankets from the floor, covering A-Yuan and shifting his son to the side.

Wei Wuxian slipped under the covers quietly then pulled his son into his arms, breathing in his comforting scent as he relaxed. He finally felt settled, present in the way that only over-worked muscles could make him feel, and he easily found himself drifting asleep.

The next day Wei Wuxian woke feeling more refreshed than he'd ever felt in the palace, and he glided throughout his day, less annoyed with his lessons and his packed schedule. He didn't mind sitting through the boring meetings and listening to the Lans drone when he looked forward to practicing at night.

However, he realized halfway through the day that he probably shouldn't leave A-Yuan unattended at night, and he resolved to ask Mo Xuanyu about it later.

Wei Wuxian waited until they'd eaten dinner and he'd tucked A-Yuan into bed to ask Mo Xuanyu to watch over A-Yuan while he practiced his sword forms. Mo Xuanyu looked slightly confused but agreed, promising he'd watch A-Yuan well.

With Mo Xuanyu keeping an eye on A-Yuan, Wei Wuxian eagerly returned to the courtyard. He pulled his stick from where he'd stashed it and started working through his forms.

By the time he finished he was covered in sweat, his muscles happily tired with a familiar exhaustion. He wiped sweat from his forehead and stepped inside, then muffled a startled laugh when he found Mo Xuanyu slumped near his bed, mouth open and slightly drooling in his sleep.

A-Yuan was still asleep, and Wei Wuxian carefully lifted Mo Xuanyu into his arms and carried him to his adjacent servant quarters. He pulled off Mo Xuanyu's shoes and tucked him into bed then returned to his own room. Wei Wuxian wiped himself clean and changed into sleeping robes, then slipped into bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Mo Xuanyu was flustered about falling asleep the next morning, but promised he'd try to stay awake the next time. He didn't, but Wei Wuxian found it oddly relaxing every night when he stepped inside to see A-Yuan sprawled across their bed with Mo Xuanyu collapsed somewhere else in the room.

The next week slipped by quicker with the addition of Wei Wuxian's nightly cultivation routine. He was still bored in his lessons, but he looked forward to training each night and

listening to A-Yuan ramble about his day in the nursery.

Although the training settled his nerves, he soon realized it did nothing to make his daily meals more palatable. He forced himself to eat with A-Yuan in the mornings, but the bland food curdled in his stomach and he couldn't make himself eat the rest of his meals. Instead, he practiced inedia and carefully dodged Mo Xuanyu's concerned looks and questions, insisting that he was eating elsewhere in-between lessons.

His cultivation was high enough that he could survive on one meal a day, but after a fortnight without a proper meal combined with his nightly training, Wei Wuxian was *exhausted.*

More than he should be.

He woke every day feeling more tired than the last, his stomach a tight snarl that he kneaded away each morning. He started to feel the weight of exhaustion under his eyes, fatigue chasing his steps until he started lightly dozing in his daily lessons.

Which hadn't been a problem—most of the teachers droned on without needing his input, and as long as he nodded every so often or pretended to write they continued without issue.

Until he fell asleep during Lan Qiren's lesson.

Wei Wuxian hadn't meant to fall asleep, but one moment he'd been listening to Lan Qiren talk about the importance of palace etiquette and the next he'd jolted awake as Lan Qiren loudly cleared his throat.

"If you think you are well versed enough to sleep during my lesson, then you should have no issue reciting the difference between the customary bows from a royal spouse to sect leaders of varying status," Lan Qiren snapped, his voice tight and sharp.

Wei Wuxian stared, mentally cursing when he realized he didn't remember a word of what Lan Qiren was talking about. Scrambling to respond, he blurted out what he could recall from Madam Yu's lessons.

"It depends on the sect leader's rank; I would bow to the most highly ranked leader first, then continue based on whether they're from a major or minor sect."

"Incorrect."

Lan Qiren frowned, his anger apparent as he strode back to his desk and retrieved a book. He returned and dropped the book on Wei Wuxian's desk, his brow twitching.

"You are the spouse of the crown prince. What matters is that the sect leaders bow to you *first*," Lan Qiren sharply said. "You will copy the Lan etiquette rules three times as punishment for your wandering attention, and I expect you to have them memorized once finished. For now, you are excused."

Wei Wuxian flinched from Lan Qiren's gaze, too tired to do more than mumble an apology and hastily gather his belongings. He quickly bowed then left, retreating to his rooms.

Mo Xuanyu looked surprised when Wei Wuxian returned early, but Wei Wuxian didn't spare him a glance as he threw himself in front of his desk and buried his face in his arms with a groan.

"Master Wei?"

"I'm fine," Wei Wuxian responded, keeping his head buried for a few more moments until he lifted his head and shook himself.

Wallowing wasn't going to change anything, and he needed to do something about finding better food. What the Lans were serving him wasn't going to change, and he couldn't risk falling asleep in any more classes lest Lan Qiren decide to punish him more harshly.

From what Mo Xuanyu had told Wei Wuxian, it wasn't likely he'd find anything decent within the palace itself. He remembered Mo Xuanyu mentioning that the townsfolk in Caiyi ate different fare than within the palace, but it wasn't like Wei Wuxian had permission to leave.

Which meant that he needed to find a way to sneak out.

Wei Wuxian glanced at Mo Xuanyu, staring until Mo Xuanyu started to blush and squeaked out a hesitant *"Y-Yes?"* that Wei Wuxian waved away.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it," Wei Wuxian said, then pulled out some paper and ink. What he needed was a palace map, but he couldn't ask Mo Xuanyu for it. Surely the Lans would refuse, and he pursed his lips at the thought that he might get Mo Xuanyu in trouble for it.

Without a map, he was left to do what he'd done shortly after being brought to Lotus Pier as a child: sneak out from his chambers at night and avoid patrols until he'd memorized every roof and passage Lotus Pier had to offer.

He wasn't worried about avoiding the patrols around the palace, but he was concerned about the palace's wards. He had a vague idea of how they worked, and although it wouldn't be hard to slip outside them it would be impossible to return without a jade token.

"Are jade tokens issued to anyone?" Wei Wuxian abruptly asked Mo Xuanyu, who was halfway through preparing some afternoon tea. Mo Xuanyu paused when Wei Wuxian spoke, his ears flicking back.

"The palace entry tokens, Master Wei?"

"Yes. Lan Qiren mentioned the rules surrounding them during our lesson today, but I can't remember what he said," Wei Wuxian lied, feeling a twinge of regret when Mo Xuanyu relaxed and continued pouring tea.

"I wouldn't worry too much Master Wei," Mo Xuanyu said as he picked up the tea and walked toward Wei Wuxian. "The tokens used to be issued to anyone entering the Cloud

Recesses regularly before the war, but now they're only issued to the royal family and Lan disciples."

"Or sect ambassadors, like Nie Mingjue," Mo Xuanyu added after some thought. He nodded to himself and then knelt and placed a cup of tea before Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian curled his hands around the tea as Mo Xuanyu's smile flickered.

"They are not granted to lowly servants such as myself," Mo Xuanyu continued, dropping his gaze and hunching his shoulders, his tail curled tightly around his knees. "But this servant has everything he needs within the palace and…does not wish to risk leaving even for a short period of time."

Something about what Mo Xuanyu said felt off and Wei Wuxian looked him over, his eyes widening in surprise when he realized Mo Xuanyu's shoulders were minutely shaking.

"Thank you for letting me know," Wei Wuxian replied, watching as Mo Xuanyu blinked and lifted his head, his eyes clearing. "I'll be able to finish my notes now."

Mo Xuanyu smiled and his tail lightly thumped against the ground, and Wei Wuxian tucked Mo Xuanyu's reaction away in the back of his mind as he poured himself into his work.

***

Wei Wuxian spent the next week using his nightly practice as an excuse to roam the palace at night, slipping over roofs and through pathways until he'd memorized the palace's layout.

It had been surprisingly easy to learn the guard's routines; easier than it should have been.

Wei Wuxian was a master of poking his nose into everything without notice, but he was almost frustrated by how predictable the guard's routines were. As he stalked past them every night he was tempted to raise the alarm or to write Lan Qiren a strongly-worded report about the holes in their defenses.

He didn't let the guards see him, but he did write several long-winded pages about what Lan Qiren should change. It'd been satisfying to tear the Lan defenses apart, but he didn't want to be thrown from the palace and so he'd hidden the pages in the bottom of a qiankun pouch.

Although slipping past the guards and getting to the main gate was easy, the bigger issue was getting around the wards.

Wei Wuxian knew the wards stretched above the wall in his courtyard, but he hadn't realized how thorough they were until he'd spent one night tracing the wards around the entire length of the palace. They blocked every entrance and exit—including ones intended for servants—and rose high above the outer walls.

Wei Wuxian might've been able to get over them and back if he had his sword, but judging from the slight curve he could pick out against the night sky he'd guessed the wards might not end, but created a dome above the palace.

Which meant that he couldn't leave unless he figured out a way back inside.

That so few Lan were granted a token meant he shouldn't steal one unless he planned to leave and never return. Because any stolen token would likely be reported quickly, and he didn't think he'd be lucky enough to steal *and* return a token any time he wanted to leave without being caught.

Which meant his only option was to break the wards.

Well, maybe not break them so much as adjust them enough that they'd let him slip through.

Thankfully, Mo Xuanyu hadn't seemed to mind when Wei Wuxian told him he was taking a break from training and could return to his own rooms at night. He'd simply bowed and wished Wei Wuxian sleep well, and Wei Wuxian did his best not to react as he promised he would.

If anything, Wei Wuxian was getting less sleep than before as he spent hours pouring through his notes and scribbling potential talismans. Although he had some notes on Lotus Pier's emergency wards, what he needed was access to the Lan's famous library, and he chuckled to himself in the dead of night when he pictured asking Lan Qiren for permission.

Don't mind him, he just wanted access to the library so he could break through the wards that only the Wens—during a literal war—had managed to destroy.

No big deal.

So Wei Wuxian made do with his hastily scrawled notes, and after poking his nose around the palace on several additional nights he finally made a breakthrough.

The wards surrounding his rooms and the building his rooms were in were connected the palace's main wards.

Wei Wuxian had been messing with the wards in his rooms one night, tracing the sigil carvings that framed his door as he sent out the smallest traces of spiritual energy. He'd been surprised when he felt the wards shimmer under his touch, and then jolted when he felt the echo of much larger wards ripple against his energy.

The ripples matched the energy of the wards around the entire building, and it didn't taken him much longer to repeat the process and realize that although the wards around his building were much weaker, they seemed to be connected to the palace's main wards.

Wei Wuxian had almost cackled in joy when he realized he could reach the main wards from his room, and had slapped a hand over his mouth at the last moment, muffling his laughter so he didn't wake A-Yuan.

Instead, Wei Wuxian had grinned and went back to his desk, kneeling down and sorting through his notes, his brush flying over paper.

By the end of the next week, Wei Wuxian was ready to try adjusting the wards. He had carefully explored the wards' limits with his spiritual energy and figured out that threaded

into the wards were sections that read spiritual signatures. These sections were made to block any spiritual signature, with a special allowance for the jade tokens.

If Wei Wuxian could adjust these sections to also allow his spiritual signature, he should be able to sneak out of the palace without being barred from returning.

And so Wei Wuxian tucked himself against his door late one night, hands pressed against the wood as he reached toward the wards with his spiritual energy. He'd realized that the wards around his rooms didn't bar him from leaving, and he was able to send his spiritual energy along the line of these wards until he brushed against the main ones.

He quickly sought out the sections he needed, pushing his energy further until he reached the complicated knot of barrier wards. Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath, steadying himself before he tentatively reached out and plucked a single thread, hoping to pull it loose and replace it with his own.

Wei Wuxian felt the thread come loose, and then before he could relax the wards around him heaved and *shattered*.

"Shit—" Wei Wuxian cursed, thrown backwards as a surge of energy exploded underneath his hands.

He distantly felt his head hit the floor and then he was out, his thoughts scattering as darkness blotted his view and pulled him under.

***

Wei Wuxian slowly came back to himself and opened his eyes to see Wen Qing leaning over him with a needle in hand. Wei Wuxian tried to push himself into a sitting position, but his arms buckled under the strain and he let out a pained hiss as jolts of pain twitched through him.

Fuck, it hurt.

"You're an idiot."

Wei Wuxian grimaced and turned to look at Wen Qing, who had tucked away the needle and was giving him her best glare.

"It's nice to see you too, Qing-jie," Wei Wuxian replied, trying not to flinch when another jolt of pain rippled through him. Wen Qing frowned and gently lifted his wrist, then sent him spiritual energy. It trickled through his meridians like a balm, soothing the pain until it was a dull rattle he could ignore.

"What happened?" Wei Wuxian asked as he lifted a hand to rub his eyes. His hand didn't protest this time, but his fingers shook and he quickly let his hand fall back into his lap. Wen Qing sighed and carefully propped Wei Wuxian up with several pillows, her glare smoothing away.

“That’s what I was going to ask you. First the wards went down, then Mo Xuanyu came running to the doctor’s quarters in tears, saying you had collapsed,” Wen Qing explained, her eyes flickering to the side. Wei Wuxian followed her gaze to see Mo Xuanyu standing not too far from the bed where Wei Wuxian lay. From what he could see, Wei Wuxian was on the bed in his room, and he winced when he realized A-Yuan was standing behind Mo Xuanyu, his tiny hands clenched into the teen’s robes.

Mo Xuanyu looked terrible, his robes askew and barely tied over his sleeping robes, hair falling out of its braid and the remnants of tears marring his face. A-Yuan looked little better, his eyes red with tears and his ears and tail showing.

Wait—

Wei Wuxian snapped his eyes to Mo Xuanyu’s, but the teen wasn’t reacting to A-Yuan’s features, merely sniffled when he met Wei Wuxian’s gaze and trailed closer to the bed.

“I came to check on you when I was alerted the wards went down, and I f-found you…A-Yuan was…” Mo Xuanyu stuttered and trailed off, tears welling and starting to fall and Wei Wuxian panicked.

“Aiya, hush hush, I’m fine, aren’t I, Qing-jie? There’s no need to cry,” Wei Wuxian chided, relieved when Mo Xuanyu reluctantly nodded and wiped his face. In contrast, A-Yuan let go of Mo Xuanyu’s robes and darted forward, crawling onto the bed and settling by Wei Wuxian’s side.

Wen Qing reminded A-Yuan to be careful, then met Wei Wuxian’s gaze.

“You’re only fine because of your cultivation. I don’t know what you did, but you essentially fried your meridians.”

Wei Wuxian flushed and started carding his hand over A-Yuan’s head, smoothing his son’s ears away. “Ah, I…well…,” Wei Wuxian hesitated, flickering his eyes from Wen Qing to Mo Xuanyu, hoping she would understand what he was trying to say. Thankfully, Wen Qing was well versed in his form of silent communication, because she rolled her eyes and turned to Mo Xuanyu.

“Would you mind taking A-Yuan and waiting outside in the courtyard? There’re a few things I need to talk to Wei Wuxian about in private.”

Mo Xuanyu looked like he wanted to protest but he merely bowed in acceptance, gently lifting A-Yuan from Wei Wuxian’s side and heading into the courtyard. Wen Qing waited until Mo Xuanyu had closed the doors behind them before she spun and sent Wei Wuxian one of her fiercest glares.

“What. Did. You. *Do?”* She snapped. Wei Wuxian flinched, sinking into himself. “The entire palace’s wards went down, then I’m called here to find you flooded with the wards’ residual energy!”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to respond then paused, repeating Wen Qing's words until his eyes widened in surprise.

"Wait, I took out the main wards?"

"So it *was* you," Wen Qing hissed, pulling out a needle and waving it near his face. "I should stun you now and drag your ass to your husband for punishment."

"Hey wait, I didn't mean to knock them out!" Wei Wuxian protested, holding up his hands in defense until Wen Qing frowned and slipped the needle away.

"Then what were you trying to do, because you had the entire palace on lockdown for the rest of the night until they restored the wards this morning."

Wei Wuxian frowned, glancing toward the windows in the room to confirm that yes, the sun had already risen.

"I was only trying to adjust them," Wei Wuxian said, rushing to clarify when Wen Qing's expression twisted. "Not to knock them out, but so I could…leave and return without issue."

Wen Qing blinked, staring for several moments before she reached out and hit him over the back of his head.

"Hey!"

"I take what I said back. You are *worse* than an idiot," Wen Qing scolded, shaking her head. "Why didn't you just ask for a jade token, like everyone else?"

Wei Wuxian rubbed the pain from his head and looked away. "I haven't seen Hanguang-jun since our wedding night, and I've been confined to my quarters outside lessons. I'd rather not have Lan Qiren punish me further for asking for something I'm not allowed to have."

The anger drained from Wen Qing's expression until she looked unbearably sad, her shoulders wilting in a resigned full-body sigh.

"Alright. Your Qing-jie understands," she gently said. "But please don't mess with the wards again. The Lan seem to think that one of the wards overloaded itself naturally, so they don't suspect your involvement. But I can't make any promises if it happens again."

"It won't, I promise," Wei Wuxian said, throwing Wen Qing a grin. *He wouldn't fail the next time he tried,* and what Wen Qing didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

Reassured, Wen Qing nodded then went to bring Mo Xuanyu back inside. Mo Xuanyu returned carrying A-Yuan on his hip, and as soon as A-Yuan saw Wei Wuxian he squirmed his way out of Mo Xuanyu's arms and ferreted himself into Wei Wuxian's bed.

Wei Wuxian smiled and tucked A-Yuan against his side, trying to ignore the residual jolts running through him as he thanked Mo Xuanyu for keeping an eye on A-Yuan.

“It was no problem, Master Wei. This one was more concerned about your condition,” Mo Xuanyu replied.

“Speaking of that,” Wen Qing started, crossing her arms with a stern look. “Have you been eating properly, Wei Wuxian?” She asked.

Wei Wuxian winced and chuckled, averting his gaze.

“Of course I am, Qing-jie.”

Wen Qing didn’t look convinced and she turned to Mo Xuanyu, raising a brow. Mo Xuanyu fidgeted and shifted on his feet, his tail curling around his knees.

“That’s ah…” Mo Xuanyu started and Wei Wuxian gave him a look, *don’t sell me out.*

Mo Xuanyu hesitated, gulped, then promptly sold Wei Wuxian out.

The *traitor.*

“This one isn’t sure what’s wrong, but I’ve only seen him eat breakfast. He doesn’t touch the rest of his meals,” Mo Xuanyu explained. Wei Wuxian glared at Mo Xuanyu and the teen squeaked, hunching into himself.

“Qing-jie, he doesn’t know what—”

“Mo-gege’s right. Baba doesn’t eat,” A-Yuan chirped. Wei Wuxian groaned at the betrayal, burying his face in his hands. Wen Qing sighed and moved toward Wei Wuxian, lifting his wrist and turning it slowly in her hands.

“You’ve lost weight,” she gently said.

“I’m sure it’s just from not having my sword to cultivate. I’m doing nothing more than attending lessons and looking pretty,” Wei Wuxian explained and then winced when Wen Qing’s grip on his wrist tightened.

“We both know that’s not what’s going on,” Wen Qing huffed. “I’ll assign additional dishes to your meals, and I expect you to eat them,” she added. Wei Wuxian grimaced and looked at his son, running his hand over his head.

“I understand, Qing-jie,” he allowed, hating the taste of the lie. A-Yuan had been assigned a similar regiment after Wei Wuxian had brought him and Wen Qing to Lotus Pier, and he didn’t look forward to the fortifying dishes that he knew were often bitter.

He didn’t want to imagine how they’d taste coming from the Lan kitchens.

Regardless, he’d find a way to get around eating them, and if he figured out how to adjust the wards Wen Qing would be none-the-wiser as long as he started gaining weight.

Appeased, Wen Qing sharply nodded and told him to rest for the remainder of the day. Mo Xuanyu would let his teachers know he couldn’t make his lessons, and Wen Qing explained

that he should be able to return to them by the next day.

Wen Qing left shortly afterwards with Mo Xuanyu on her heels. Mo Xuanyu promised he would return shortly after notifying Wei Wuxian's teachers, and in the meantime he could stay in bed with A-Yuan.

As soon as Wei Wuxian was alone with A-Yuan he sighed and pulled A-Yuan closer. A-Yuan pressed his head under Wei Wuxian's chin and dug his hands into his robes, curling into him. They floated in silence for awhile until A-Yuan spoke, his voice hesitant and soft.

"It was scary, baba," he said and Wei Wuxian *ached.*

"I know, baobei," he replied, tugging the blankets to cover himself and A-Yuan. "It won't happen again, I promise."

"Mn," A-Yuan hummed and closed his eyes, his breathing slowing until he was fast asleep.

Wei Wuxian sighed into the silence, then started thinking about what he'd done wrong with the wards.

He wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

***

Lan Wangji had been married for a full month.

He wasn't sure how time had passed so quickly, but his schedule had been as busy as it always was and he'd barely had enough time in the day to unwind in the evenings, let alone wonder how his husband was fairing.

It didn't help that he hadn't seen Wei Wuxian since their wedding.

Lan Wangji knew their marriage was one of convenience, but that Wei Wuxian hadn't even asked to see him made something uncomfortable twist through him, toxic and thick as he pictured his mother's sad smiles hidden behind well-placed laughter.

It wouldn't do well to dwell on such thoughts, however, and Lan Wangji settled himself as he headed towards his brother's quarters.

His schedule did not align frequently with his brother's or his uncle's, but they'd agreed years ago to set aside at least one meal each week to eat dinner together.

Lan Wangji took solace in these meals; they were usually the only time he or his brother had to unwind without the weight of their titles pressing down on their shoulders.

By the time Lan Wangji reached his brother's rooms, his brother and uncle were waiting for him, dinner spread across the table they knelt at. Lan Xichen smiled when Lan Wangji entered, looking soft in a way Lan Wangji knew he'd never be able to reflect; a sharp contrast to their uncle, whose stiff posture never left, even during these meals.

At least his brother looked more relaxed than he had during the prior week.

Last week the wards had collapsed during the night with no warning, and although they'd since repaired them, they had found no culprit or reason behind their failure. Lan Xichen had looked ragged last week, his expression pinched and worried as their strongest cultivators tried to figure out what went wrong.

Lan Wangji himself had searched for the cause of the wards' failure, but even he hadn't been able to find anything out of place. They'd since increased the number of guards around the palace and had no further issues with the wards, but it was unsettling to say the least.

Lan Wangji sat across from his brother at the table and moved to pour tea for him and his uncle. Lan Xichen thanked him, then started doling out food. They ate quietly once everyone had their own dishes, the soft clinking of chopsticks the only sound in the room.

It wasn't until they finished eating and Lan Xichen set down his chopsticks that he finally broke the silence, turning a soft smile toward Lan Wangji.

"Have you been well, Wangji?" Lan Xichen asked. Lan Wangji quietly hummed, inclining his head towards his brother.

"Mn."

"Have you learned anything further about the incident with the wards?" Lan Qiren asked. Lan Wangji glanced at his uncle then looked away.

"I have not."

Lan Qiren sighed, rubbing his brow. "I am unsure whether that is good news."

"There have been no further breaches, Uncle. Surely that belays cause for concern," Lan Xichen said, sipping his tea. "I have heard no stirrings of discontent; no one was harmed and nothing has been reported missing. It appears that it may simply have been a malfunction of the new wards."

Lan Qiren frowned but nodded, drinking his tea slowly. Lan Wangji glanced at his own cup, wondering whether he should voice his concerns. He had no proof that the wards failed due to someone's interference, but the instincts he'd developed during the war whispered that something was wrong.

His brother had enough to worry about, however, and so Lan Wangji shifted his worries to the side. *He'd let brother know if he learned anything new.*

"That reminds me, brother, what has been bothering you?"

Lan Wangji blinked in surprise, turning toward Lan Xichen. Lan Xichen had his hands wrapped around his tea, a soft frown marring his expression. Worried.

When Lan Wangji didn't respond Lan Xichen sighed, then straightened and held Lan Wangji's gaze.

“You’ve been more distant lately, Wangji. Something other than the wards has been troubling you, has it not?” Lan Xichen calmly asked, and Lan Wangji dropped his gaze.

Of course his brother had noticed.

Lan Wangji took several moments as he tried to pull his thoughts together. His brother was used to giving him the time needed to collect himself, and he simply refilled their tea and waited calmly until Lan Wangji spoke.

“Wei Wuxian.”

Lan Xichen frowned and traded a look with their uncle. “Has something happened with him?” Lan Xichen gently asked. Lan Wangji tilted his head, the furrow in his brow deepening.

“No,” Lan Wangji replied, struggling to find the words to explain his trepidation. “I do not know how he fares.”

“Uncle?” Lan Xichen prompted. Lan Qiren shifted slightly, taking a long drink of tea.

“He has been…respectful and diligent during his lessons, despite his nature,” Lan Qiren explained as he stroked his bread, looking thoughtful. “However, he is not applying himself, much to the ire of myself and his other instructors.”

“It is likely hard for him to have moved here so suddenly. I am sure he’s still adjusting,” Lan Xichen offered. Lan Qiren shook his head with a sigh, setting down his tea.

“Although I wish to agree I do not think that is the issue. The boy is adept, much like his mother. My only solace is that he hasn’t created any issues like she was wont to do.”

“You knew his mother?” Lan Wangji asked before he could stop himself. Lan Xichen looked similarly surprised and Lan Qiren huffed, his cheeks flushing slightly.

“Much to the ire of the sects at the time, she studied here as a visiting disciple when we were young,” Lan Qiren said, looking slightly perturbed. “You likely would have met Wei Wuxian as a visiting Jiang disciple, had the war not started the year we planned to allow visiting disciples.”

Lan Wangji wasn’t sure how he felt about losing the opportunity to have met his husband earlier, but he folded the information close to his chest and ignored the dull ache it brought.

“…He has not asked for me?” Lan Wangji asked into the silence. Lan Xichen sucked in a breath, whispering “*Oh, Wangji,”* before he covered Lan Wangji’s hands with one of his own. Lan Wangji grounded himself in the gentle pressure.

“He has not,” Lan Qiren replied, and Lan Wangji felt his brother’s hand tighten around his own. “However,” Lan Qiren continued, hesitating slightly. “He has not requested anything.”

Lan Wangji lifted his head in surprise and Lan Xichen frowned, withdrawing his hand.

“That is odd. I am aware he didn’t bring retainers with him, nor many belongings. Surely he’s requested something,” Lan Xichen asked.

“He has not,” Lan Qiren repeated, pursing his lips into a frown. “And aside from lessons, he has not left his quarters either.”

Lan Wangji felt the curl of worry in his chest bloom into concern, and he shared a quick look with his brother, who mirrored his expression.

“Perhaps he is…homesick?” Lan Xichen suggested. Lan Qiren shifted where he sat, looking vaguely uncomfortable.

“That may be the case, but what is more concerning is that he has not shown his features to anyone during his lessons, myself included.”

Lan Xichen’s eyes widened in alarm, and Lan Wangji felt concern sink its claws deeper into him.

“Lan Mingshan has reported the same about his son; no one’s seen their features,” Lan Qiren continued. Lan Xichen made a soft noise of concern and turned toward Lan Wangji.

“What about you, Wangji?”

“I have not.”

“But the Jiang do not hide their features like the Nie and Jin…” Lan Xichen trailed off, grappling for an explanation.

Lan Wangji understood how his brother felt.

He’d been surprised on their wedding night when he’d lifted Wei Wuxian’s veil and realized his features weren’t showing. It had been odd, but Lan Wangji hadn’t questioned it too deeply until after Wei Wuxian returned from changing into his sleeping robes.

Lan Wangji had spent several moments trying to process the lack of clothing his husband had been wearing, barely managing to respond and decline his fumbled attempts at offering himself—as if Lan Wangji would ever force an unwilling partner—as he tried to process the fact that his husband *still* hadn’t been displaying his features.

The Lan traditionally displayed their features at all times, promoting control and clarity between oneself and others. To hide one’s features in front of a spouse was a clear indication of distrust and rejection, and Lan Wangji had only ever heard stories about spurned lovers or political marriages instigating such a refusal.

Even the sects that did not display their features openly usually did so when alone with their family or spouse.

So when Wei Wuxian hadn’t displayed his features, it had hurt in a way Lan Wangji hadn’t been expecting.

Lan Wangji didn't like the implications of both Wei Wuxian and his son not having displayed their features to anyone; *surely something was wrong?* If it was something Lan Wangji had done then he needed to ask for forgiveness. He didn't want to be the reason his husband wasn't—

"Truly, I do not know what to make of it," Lan Qiren said, interrupting Lan Wangji's thoughts. "I have also noticed that he is…thinner than when he first arrived."

"But he was already slight when he got here," Lan Xichen said, looking from Lan Wangji to their uncle and back. "Although I only saw him a few times I did not think he had room to lose weight."

"He does not," Lan Qiren confirmed, much to Lan Wangji's concern. "I have been informed that his doctor has increased his meals, but I haven't noticed this making any difference."

Lan Wangji sat in the uncomfortable silence that followed his uncle's words, lost about what he should do. Wei Wuxian was known for being strong-willed and brilliant as a general during the war, and to hear that he'd been losing weight and secluding himself raised too many red flags for Lan Wangji to ignore.

"I do not…," Lan Wangi started, trying to pull his thoughts together. "How might I—" He cut himself off with a frown, turning to his brother for help. "Brother I…"

"I understand, Wangji," Lan Xichen soothed, glancing at their uncle before he replied. "Perhaps…it would be best for you to check on him?"

Lan Wangji clenched his hands in his lap, unsure how he could approach Wei Wuxian when Wei Wuxian clearly didn't want to see him. He must have made a face because Lan Xichen reached out and gently brushed his hair away from his face, letting his hand rest gently against his cheek.

"What if you picked his son up from the nursery?" Lan Xichen suggested as he dropped his hand. "Mo Xuanyu usually retrieves him in the afternoons, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you were to do it instead."

Lan Wangji continued to frown and Lan Xichen softly laughed.

"I promise he won't mind, and you have nothing to worry about with his son. The nursery has only reported good things." Lan Xichen smiled, taking a drink of his tea. Their uncle nodded in agreement and Lan Wangji dipped his head.

"Mn. I will take Wei Yuan back to Wei Wuxian's rooms tomorrow then," Lan Wangji replied. He felt a flutter of relief at having an excuse to see his husband, and he fervently wished Wei Yuan wouldn't mind the disruption to his normal routine.

Lan Wangji settled into silence as his brother and uncle resumed talking, trading updates about the palace and their routines as Lan Wangji drifted and tried not to worry about what the next day would bring.

Chapter End Notes

I cannot wait for LWJ to meet A-Yuan, folks, it's gonna be full of so much fluff. And angst, because it's me, but mostly fluff. Also, be glad I didn't write MXY's perspective of finding WWX after the wards went out bc it hurt. A lot. Also, I wouldn't think too much about how wards work in this world. I had a running joke of "one light goes out, they all go out!" stuck on loop in my head when I was writing this chapter.

Also also what WWX did with the wards was *not* easy, and it's going to be absolutely hilarious when the Lans find out it was him. :3

Extra:
LWJ: -trying to give WWX space to settle into the Cloud Recesses-
WWX: Why doesn't my husband like me. :C

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> This chapter ended up being half fluff and half angst despite my best intentions.
> -flees-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week after accidentally knocking out the wards, Wei Wuxian was ready to try again.

He'd spent several nights pouring over his notes and trailing around the edges of the palace wards until he memorized how they worked. They fluttered whenever anyone drew near, and different sections relaxed anytime someone passed through with a token.

Unlike what he'd thought, the wards didn't unlock to allow those with a jade token through. Instead the wards expanded, adding the jade token's signature to their barriers until the person had passed through.

Which was probably why they'd shattered when Wei Wuxian tried to remove a piece.

Wei Wuxian shook himself, shuffling through his notes one final time. Evening had already fallen and A-Yuan was tucked away in Wei Wuxian's bed, curled tightly underneath the covers. Across the room Mo Xuanyu picked up Wei Wuxian's robes, his ears twitching whenever he came across another pile on the floor.

Wei Wuxian had tried to tell Mo Xuanyu he didn't mind his clothes lying about, but Mo Xuanyu had insisted they needed to be put away properly, rambling something about his duties as he puttered around.

Reassured that he hadn't missed anything in his notes, Wei Wuxian stood and walked over to Mo Xuanyu, plucking a set of nondescript robes he practiced his forms in from a pile on the floor. Mo Xuanyu startled at the movement, flushing with a robe in his hands.

"Is Master Wei practicing again tonight?"

"I am," Wei Wuxian replied, stepping away to untie his outer robes and replace them with the practice ones. They were as black as his normal robes but of lesser quality, and wouldn't stand out if Wei Wuxian managed to sneak out of the palace to Caiyi.

Mo Xuanyu squeaked as soon as Wei Wuxian untied his outer robes and Wei Wuxian grinned, quickly slipping on his practice robes and reassuring Mo Xuanyu he was decent. Mo Xuanyu had covered his face with his hands when Wei Wuxian switched his robes, and then flailed when Wei Wuxian tossed his discarded outer robes at his head.

“Master W-Wei!” Mo Xuanyu stammered, face turning red as he scrambled to pull the robes into his arms. The robes caught on his ears when he moved them, and Wei Wuxian clutched his stomach and tried not to laugh when Mo Xuanyu finally pulled the robes from his head.

Mo Xuanyu’s hair was properly disheveled, and had A-Yuan not been sleeping Wei Wuxian would’ve poked and prodded the teen until he’d turned a darker shade of red. Deciding to spare him, Wei Wuxian grinned and headed toward the courtyard, waving a hand over his shoulder as he slid open the door and stepped outside.

The chilly night greeted him as he slipped onto the grass and Wei Wuxian padded through the courtyard until he reached the palace’s outer walls. The walls were hidden behind several trees, and Wei Wuxian stepped behind one before he clambered up the side of the palace wall.

When he reached the top he sat astride the wall, the wards rippling around him in the night air. He carefully slowed his breathing, forcing his nerves to settle as he pressed his hands against the wall and reached for the wards.

The wards hummed against his hands and Wei Wuxian nodded to himself, reassured that they were as strong here as they were in his rooms. He’d briefly debated adding his signature to the carvings around his doors, but he didn’t want Mo Xuanyu questioning him if he noticed new carvings.

This would do.

Wei Wuxian reached into his sleeves and pulled out a sharp rock, turning it over in his hand. He’d found the rock a few nights before and had spent hours chipping away at its edges until they were sharp enough to cut his fingers.

Wei Wuxian preferred to use a knife, but he could only imagine the Lan’s reactions if he had asked for such a tool. Too much of a weapon to trust him with, let alone the questions it would raise for why he needed it.

Steadying himself, Wei Wuxian carefully drew the rock over his forearm until a trail of blood started dripping down his arm. He quickly set the rock aside then dipped his fingers in blood.

He pressed his bloodied fingers against the wall, etching the sigils he needed. The blood contrasted sharply against the pale walls and Wei Wuxian reminded himself that no one patrolled them this far out.

Which meant they would never find the bloody marks.

As soon as Wei Wuxian finished drawing the array he closed his eyes and reached for the wards again, sending out a tendril of his spiritual energy. He found the place where the wards melted around the tokens and he carefully pressed against them with his spiritual energy, working his signature through the array and into the wards.

Wei Wuxian held his breath as he worked, weaving the array into the wards until the sigils settled around the old ones, rippling slightly but not falling loose. As soon as they settled Wei

Wuxian twisted his hands, directing his energy until the additions joined seamlessly with the old ones.

When he finished Wei Wuxian lifted his hands from the array, tentatively prodding the wards and feeling a glimmer of satisfaction when they rippled and moved around his energy, not reacting in the slightest.

Grinning, Wei Wuxian opened his eyes and swung his feet over the edge of the wall, staring into the forest that guarded the backside of the palace.

It was now or never.

Wei Wuxian brushed a hand over the cut on his arm, using spiritual energy to seal the wound before he pushed himself from the wall. He landed in the forest outside the palace with a quiet *thud*, and he took a moment to breathe in the night air, excitement fluttering in his chest.

The wards would either let him return or not when he tried to reenter, and he brushed aside his concern as he headed into the forest. The siren song of proper food awaited him, and he eagerly vanished into the night, working his way toward Caiyi.

The moon was high in the sky by the time Wei Wuxian reached Caiyi, and despite the town's proximity to the Lan palace and its thousands of rules, the town's night market was still bustling when Wei Wuxian arrived.

Couples strolled through the market, friends and lovers laughing into the night and hanging onto one another as they walked—or stumbled—their way around. Vendors called out in a gentle dialect, harking their wares as they professed the uniqueness of them.

And the *food.*

Fires crackled near several stalls, promising sticky *tanghulu* and savory meats and Wei Wuxian felt his mouth water as he scented the air. Nothing smelled as spicy as the markets in Lotus Pier, but he could taste various spices in the air, breathed in the flavors, and quickly found himself in front of a stall selling skewered meats.

He bought three skewers, stuffing one into his mouth as he paid much to the amusement of the woman running the stall. She joked that his wife must not be feeding him enough at home and Wei Wuxian flushed, devouring the rest of the skewer as he laughed then quickly hurried away.

The skewers were divine. Wei Wuxian scarfed them down with a speed he hadn't used since he was a starving kit of the streets, his tails itching to be free. To sway and curl around his delight and the savory warmth filling his stomach.

Wei Wuxian continued through the streets, trying sweets and hand-pulled noodles until the gnawing in his stomach trickled away. Until he sighed in pleasure as he ate a steamed bun, licking the sticky red bean paste from his fingers as he walked past drunken couples and rowdy inns.

Thankfully, no one seemed to realize who he was.

Wei Wuxian avoided the streets they'd walked through when he first arrived and had pulled the ribbon from his hair, letting his hair fall around his shoulders. He wasn't sure whether it would be enough of a disguise to protect him, but the benefit of being locked away in the palace was that, apparently, few people in Caiyi likely knew what he looked like.

Which meant that no one paid him any more attention than they did to everyone else wandering around the markets at night, and he relaxed as time slipped by without anyone raising the alarm.

Wei Wuxian eventually turned his attention to finding a place to sit down to eat, wanting to chase his food with a fine alcohol. He'd heard rumors that Caiyi was known for a wine called Emperor's Smile, and Wei Wuxian chuckled to himself as he pictured how such a wine was named after someone from the ascetic Lans, let alone their emperor.

This late into the night there weren't as many inns open, and Wei Wuxian wandered until he found one with their doors thrown wide, light and rowdy laughter bubbling onto the street. He slipped inside and into the warmth, grinning as he breathed in the smell of cheap alcohol and good food.

The inn wasn't large, but there were several tables scattered throughout the room, men and women talking over one another as they ate their food. There were a mix of features when Wei Wuxian looked for them, ears twitching and tails curling lazily around their owners or their partners.

On one side of the room a petite woman sat, her features a pure white that matched her robes. She played a pipa to the room at large, crooning a soft melody as a waitress maneuvered around the room with food-laden dishes.

Wei Wuxian headed toward the back of the room, sitting at an empty table and gesturing for the waitress's attention. She finished dealing with her current customer before she appeared before him. She was heavy-set and wearing simple robes, and smiled when she saw Wei Wuxian, her expression open and welcoming.

"Haven't seen you around here before," she greeted and Wei Wuxian chuckled, waving a hand. Before he could respond the woman continued, glancing at his hair. "Only travelers don't show their features in these parts. Always takes them a couple days to get used to it."

The woman chuckled to herself, her eyes crinkling. Wei Wuxian nervously swallowed and nodded along, rushing to confirm her assumptions.

"I'm staying across town," he said, eyes widening as he leaned forward to whisper conspiratorially. "But I heard the food here was better, and I came to see whether it was true."

The woman barked a laugh and Wei Wuxian relaxed. He hadn't heard anything in particular about this inn's food, but a little flattery usually went a long way and distracted people from questioning him too closely.

“We have better rooms too, and if we weren’t booked I’d insist you stay here!” The woman said before she looked him over once more. “So what’ll you be having?”

Wei Wuxian rattled off an order for several different dishes, requesting that she add the most popular dish they sold and a jar of Emperor’s Smile. She nodded then left, sweeping past a few tables until she vanished into the kitchen.

Wei Wuxian was hungry again by the time the food arrived, and he was pleased to see that although the dishes looked mild, he could smell the heady scent of spices worked into each one.

Not to mention the smell of the wine when he broke the seal.

He’d planned on pouring a small amount to test first, but ended up downing several gulps before the waitress had even left, and she laughed as she left him to it. Wei Wuxian gasped when he came up for air, shivering slightly as he licked wine from his lips.

Wei Wuxian hummed, basking in the taste of the finest wine he’d ever had before he continued drinking. It was strong and sweet and burned on the way down, warming his chest until he was tempted to let out a pleased whine.

He didn’t, but he did finish the wine before he’d touched his food, and he flagged someone down and ordered several more jars before he tucked into his food. Each dish was better than the street food he’d already eaten, and he steadily devoured everything including the additional wine as he settled into the buoyant atmosphere.

Wei Wuxian was pleasantly full when he finished, and he cleared his tab and headed into the night feeling lighter than he had since he’d been brought to the palace. He slipped from Caiyi into the forest surrounding the palace, weaving his way around trees as he headed back toward his courtyard.

The joy he felt from having a full stomach didn’t abide until he reached the palace walls surrounding his courtyard. Either the wards would let him in, or he’d have to relinquish himself to the guards at the main gates and beg for forgiveness.

He pursed his lips and scaled the walls, crouching once he reached the top and scanning for the array. The blood had dried but was otherwise the same as he left it. Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath and leaned forward, closing his eyes as he pressed against the wards.

And then he promptly fell from the wall.

Wei Wuxian hadn’t fully expected his array to work, and he found himself moving through the wards and falling before he could catch himself, landing face-first on the ground.

The grass was cool beneath him, tickling his skin as he burst into barely-contained giggles.

It had *worked.*

The wards hadn’t locked him out and he could get good food any night he wanted without anyone knowing and—

Wei Wuxian devolved into cackles, rolling around in the grass and hugging his stomach until the jitters faded and he pushed himself to his feet.

The sky was starting to turn a lighter shade of blue and heralding the morning sun when Wei Wuxian stepped into his rooms. Mo Xuanyu, unsurprisingly, was fast asleep on the floor beside Wei Wuxian's bed, and Wei Wuxian carried him to his own rooms and tucked him away before returning to his own.

He didn't bother taking off more than his shoes before he crawled into bed beside A-Yuan, pulling his son close with a contented purr. He'd barely closed his eyes before he'd fallen asleep, his stomach full for the first time in weeks.

The downside to his late-night wanderings was that if felt like he'd been asleep for less than a shichen when Mo Xuanyu woke him to start his day. Wei Wuxian groaned, curling tighter into his sheets in protest, pleading to sleep longer.

A-Yuan, being the child that he was, ruined Wei Wuxian's hopes by jumping onto his side and kneeing him in the bladder. Lamenting his lost sleep, Wei Wuxian scooped a giggling A-Yuan into his arms and let Mo Xuanyu help prepare them both for the day.

To say that Wei Wuxian's lessons didn't go well that day would be an understatement.

He'd fallen asleep in more than one lesson, his teachers assigning various punishments to copy different parts of the rules at least five times. He'd let his attention drift in others, his mouth salivating as he recalled the savory food he'd eaten until Lan Qiren had slammed the book he was holding closed.

Lan Qiren told him to rewrite the rules of conduct for his inattention and dismissed him early, his gaze strict as Wei Wuxian gathered his things and left.

When Wei Wuxian returned to his rooms he stepped inside with a whine, opening his arms in preparation for A-Yuan tackling him when he arrived.

Except A-Yuan didn't tackle his legs when he stepped inside, and a quick glance around the room told him that neither A-Yuan or Mo Xuanyu were there. *Odd.* Mo Xuanyu almost always returned before Wei Wuxian.

Shaking his head, Wei Wuxian moved to set his books and notes on his desk, grimacing at the thought of writing out his punishments within the next few days. He sighed, deciding to get a head start on the copying before A-Yuan returned when he heard a knock and the doors to his room slide open.

Wei Wuxian grinned, turning and rushing toward the doors to greet Mo Xuanyu and A-Yuan before he realized who was at the door and stopped dead.

Hanguang-jun stood in the doorway, his expression bland and regal and Wei Wuxian had barely registered that it was *Hanguang-jun* at his door before he realized that A-Yuan was at his side, holding his hand.

Fuck.

***

The day slowly slipped by as Lan Wangji moved from meeting to meeting, and he found himself distracted as the evening drew close.

He was picking Wei Yuan up from the nursery today, and as his meetings dwindled he found an unfamiliar uneasiness twisting in his stomach. His brother had assured him Wei Wuxian wouldn't mind, but Lan Wangji had seldom found himself around children and the thought of not knowing how to entreaty himself to Wei Yuan unsettled him.

When his last meeting ended Lan Wangji headed toward the nursery, tucking his hands into his sleeves as he gracefully walked through the halls. Servants and fellow cultivators bowed to him as he passed, and he inclined his head when appropriate.

He hesitated when he reached the nursery, staring at the door as he tried to pull words to his lips. But the proper words fell through his fingers, slipping away as his tail twitched against the floor.

Interacting with children shouldn't be different than interacting with adults, but his thoughts didn't stop the unease creeping through him and urging him to run in the opposite direction.

Stilling his tail and steeling himself, Lan Wangji straightened his already-perfect posture and opened the door.

Inside, the nursery was in chaos.

The voices of many babbling children washed over Lan Wangji, excited chattering arising from various groups dotted throughout the room. Several children were crowded around one table, pointing over books and passing them around. Others were rolling around on the floor, crooning in small noises to mimic their spirit forms.

It was an organized chaos only allowed within these walls, and it was a testament to how engrossed the children were in their respective activities that none of them noticed Lan Wangji stepping inside.

Lan Wangji found Lan Mingshan in the middle of the room and covered in children. They knelt with a calm expression, carding their hand through a child's hair that was asleep on their lap. Lan Jingyi, a distant cousin to the royal line, was sprawled against Lan Mingshan's waist next to the child in their lap, his mouth open wide as he drooled in his sleep.

And behind Lan Mingshan several children sat, their hands buried in Lan Mingshan's hair as they struggled to braid it. Lan Wangji blinked in surprise at the allowance, then nodded to himself when he saw Lan Mingshan had tucked their forehead ribbon into their topknot, safely keeping it away from the children's hands.

Lan Mingshan looked up when Lan Wangji walked over, their eyes widening in surprise before they gently dipped their head—much to the chagrin of the children behind them.

“Your highness, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?” Lan Mingshan asked with a small smile, gesturing to the children around them. “This one apologizes for not being able to greet your properly.”

“Mn. It is no concern,” Lan Wangji replied, then stiffened when the children behind Lan Mingshan paused. They slowly leaned around Lan Mingshan to stare at Lan Wangji with wide eyes, and one particularly young child tugged on Lan Mingshan’s hair.

When Lan Wangji glanced at the young child, they squeaked and promptly hid underneath Lan Mingshan’s hair. The movement didn’t actually hide much of the child, and Lan Wangji felt the urge to shift on his feet as the other children continued to stare. *He didn’t know what to do.*

Thankfully, Lan Mingshan laughed and broke the tension, gently pulling the child from their hair and sending them and the others off to play before they turned their attention back to Lan Wangji.

“Is your highness here to pick someone up?” Lan Mingshan eventually asked when Lan Wangji didn’t speak, and Lan Wangji inclined his head.

“Wei Yuan,” Lan Wangji said, pausing for a moment before he added, “I am returning him to Wei Wuxian.”

Lan Mingshan’s eyes twinkled, and Lan Wangji reminded himself that there wasn’t anything odd about him taking his husband’s son back to him. Other than the fact that he’d barely met Wei Yuan during the wedding ceremony, too distracted by carrying Wei Wuxian through the ceremony to notice much about his child.

“Okay then, your highness. Give me a moment to wake him.”

Lan Mingshan proceeded to gently brush their hand over the back of the child sleeping in their lap, and Lan Wangji abruptly realized the child must be Wei Yuan.

His features weren’t showing.

Lan Wangji knew no one had seen them, but it was disconcerting to see it in person.

Wei Yuan stirred with Lan Mingshan’s careful prodding, then the boy stretched with a full-body yawn, splaying his arms and legs wide. Lan Mingshan rumbled in encouragement, helping Wei Yuan to his feet as the boy rubbed his eyes. Lan Mingshan stood after gently moving Lan Jingyi aside, and the young dragon whined in response, rolling several paces away before falling asleep again.

And then, before Lan Wangji could worry over how to introduce himself to Wei Yuan, Wei Yuan stumbled toward him with his arms thrown wide.

“Mo-gege,” Wei Yuan sleepily called and ran into Lan Wangji’s legs, latching onto him with a surprisingly tight grip. He rubbed his head against Lan Wangji’s legs and then lifted his arms. “Up!”

Lan Wangji panicked and froze, glancing at Lan Mingshan for help. He tried not to feel betrayed when Lan Mingshan softly laughed, covering their mouth with a hand as delight sparked in their eyes. At a loss, Lan Wangji lifted his hands, unsure whether he should announce himself or concede to Wei Yuan's demands.

Wei Yuan pouted when he wasn't picked up and then tipped his head, his eyes widening when he looked at Lan Wangji

Lan Wangji met Wei Yuan's gaze and the boy *flinched*, curling into himself and scrambling away from Lan Wangji as the scent of fear filled the air. Within moments Wei Yuan was hiding behind Lan Mingshan's legs, trembling as he dug his fingers into Lan Mingshan's robes.

Stunned, Lan Wangji took a step back, letting his hands drop as his tail twitched. *What had he done?*

Lan Mingshan frowned and glanced at Wei Yuan, unhooking the boy's hands from his robes and coaxing him to stand by his side.

"Wei Yuan, this is his highness, Lan Wangji," Lan Mingshan gently explained. "He's who your baba married."

Wei Yuan puffed his cheeks and tucked himself closer to Lan Mingshan.

"Why is he here?"

Lan Mingshan smiled and rubbed a hand over his head, glancing at Lan Wangji.

"He's here to pick you up today," Lan Mingshan said, and Lan Wangji could only watch as the scent of fear radiating off Wei Yuan grew stronger. "Aiya, little one, there is no need to be afraid," Lan Mingshan added, their brow furring in concern.

Wei Yuan shook his head, refusing to look at Lan Wangji.

"Is he going to take me away?

Something within Lan Wangji ached at Wei Yuan's words, blue gentians shriveling underneath snow as he waited outside doors that would never open. Waited until his brother retrieved him, tugging him to numb feet and leading him away as Lan Wangji's tears fell into the snow.

"En. I will take you to Wei Wuxian."

Wei Yuan startled when Lan Wangji spoke, his fear dissipating as he turned to him and stared.

"What about Mo-gege?"

"He is aware I am retrieving you, and is readying dinner for Wei Wuxian and yourself."

Wei Yuan blinked, looking up at Lan Mingshan. Lan Mingshan nodded and Wei Yuan fully relaxed, releasing his hold on Lan Mingshan's robes.

"This one needs to speak with his highness before you leave, so why don't you wake Lan Jingyi and tell him goodbye?" Lan Mingshan suggested. Wei Yuan bobbed his head and scurried toward Lan Jingyi, leaving Lan Wangji alone with Lan Mingshan.

As soon as Wei Yuan left, Lan Mingshan's expression fell into one of concern.

"I apologize, your highness, Wei Yuan has not reacted like that for some time now," Lan Mingshan said, and Lan Wangji minutely frowned.

"This has happened before?"

"The day of the wedding he would not stop crying no matter what this one tried," Lan Mingshan sighed, curling a hand against their chin. "He eventually grew tired and slept, but when the servants came to get him ready for the wedding he—" Lan Mingshan cut themself off, pursing their lips before they met Lan Wangji's gaze.

"The boy could not be consoled. This one thought to send someone to retrieve Jiang Wanyin, and the boy finally settled within his arms."

Lan Wangji looked at Wei Yuan in alarm. The boy had seemed content within the nursery before Lan Wangji had arrived. Surely he hadn't cried himself to sleep daily? *Someone would have told him—*

"I'm not sure what happened, but after that day he's behaved relatively normally. Aside from, well," Lan Mingshan paused, gesturing toward their own ears and tail. Lan Wangji hummed in response, worry curling through him.

Lan Wangji tensed when Lan Mingshan stepped closer, their brow furrowing as they absently tugged on a messy braid in their hair.

"I was waiting to speak with his highness Wei Wuxian about this but…" Lan Mingshan paused, looking to make sure Wei Yuan was still near Lan Jingyi before they continued. "I am concerned that he has been mistreated before."

Lan Wangji stiffened, an unpleasant prickling crawling under his skin. *Who would dare?*

"Since he arrived?" Lan Wangji questioned, his voice clipped. Lan Mingshan quickly shook their head.

"I don't believe so. If Wei Yuan isn't with me he's with his father or Mo Xuanyu, and the boy seems to be strongly attached to both of them."

"Then what is the cause of your concern?" Lan Wangji asked, mildly relieved that no one in the palace appeared to have caused Wei Yuan harm. Lan Mingshan shifted where they stood, curling their tail around their feet in a way most Lans didn't unless significantly distressed.

It didn't bode well.

“One of the children, Lan Jingyi, actually, recently asked Wei Yuan if he was a fox like his father and why he didn’t show his ears or tails,” Lan Mingshan explained, tensing their shoulders. “I assumed Wei Yuan would say it was his preference not to but instead he broke into tears.”

“By the time I reached them, Wei Yuan had knelt and pressed his hands over his head, babbling that he was a good boy and wouldn’t show anyone his features. When I tried telling him he wouldn’t get in trouble for displaying them he started *shaking*,” Lan Mingshan breathed, covering their mouth. “Nothing I did calmed him, and I had to carry him until he cried himself out.”

“I haven’t dared ask him about it since, and I didn’t know how to let his highness Wei Wuxian know without alarming him,” Lan Mingshan finished, curling their hands into their sleeves.

“Mn, I understand your concern,” Lan Wangji replied, struggling to organize his thoughts. All he could think about was how the same acidic smell of fear had rolled off Wei Wuxian on their wedding night.

Maybe it had something to do with Wei Yuan’s mother?

The Jiangs had been notoriously quiet during the marital negotiations when Lan Qiren had asked about Wei Yuan’s mother and any remaining family. They had only reassured them Wei Wuxian had not been married before, and Lan Wangji faintly wondered if their hesitance had to do with her.

Because it was easy to understand why Wei Wuxian hadn’t displayed himself during the war. The Wens had supposedly hunted the last of the *huli jing* decades before, and had vilified them in the eyes of the rest of the sects.

But there was little to fear within the palace, let alone a nursery full of children or within their private quarters.

Or with his husband.

“I will talk to Uncle about it,” Lan Wangji said, and Lan Mingshan bowed, murmuring that they’d be happy to meet with Lan Qiren to discuss what to do.

Lan Wangji nodded then glanced behind Lan Mingshan, surprise flickering through him when he realized Wei Yuan was standing not too far from them. Wei Yuan watched Lan Wangji with a wary expression before he walked over, accurately assuming they had finished their conversation.

Lan Wangji held Wei Yuan’s gaze for several moments before he nodded and held out his hand. Whenever Lan Wangji ran into Lan Jingyi the boy insisted upon holding his hand, and thankfully Wei Yuan didn’t seem to mind.

He carefully slipped his hand into Lan Wangji’s, keeping his hold feather-light.

Lan Wangji slowly tightened his grip, bidding farewell to Lan Mingshan before he gently pulled Wei Yuan from the nursery.

Wei Yuan didn't speak as they walked through the palace.

Lan Wangji didn't mind the silence, but he knew most children as young as Wei Yuan constantly chattered—or at least Lan Jingyi did. But Wei Yuan walked quietly, his strides calm and poised in a way that most Lan children didn't achieve until they were a few years older.

His only solace was that Wei Yuan didn't smell of fear.

He did shy away from anyone they passed, however, tucking himself close to Lan Wangji almost imperceptibly until the person vanished behind them.

And then, all too soon, Lan Wangji found himself outside Wei Wuxian's quarters, his breath frozen in a twisted snarl.

Lan Wangji hadn't visited his mother's quarters since he was a child. *He couldn't.* He'd mourned her passing every year and vetted the groundkeepers who kept her courtyard immaculate, but he'd never been able to bring himself to visit when he was still taking lessons as a child.

And then he had fought a war. And now he was here.

Lan Wangji had been against Wei Wuxian staying in his mother's rooms.

Something inside him had protested when Lan Qiren brought up her quarters as a suggestion, enough that he had voiced his concern. Lan Xichen had given him a long look, sighing before he'd asked for Lan Qiren's reasoning.

Their mother's rooms were the safest within the palace walls, guarded at every entrance with wards preventing intruders from entering. Lan Qiren suggested it would be the best place for Wei Wuxian to stay until he'd adjusted to the palace. He would have his privacy, and if any visiting ambassadors dared to go after him due to his heritage, they'd be blocked from entering.

Lan Wangji had softly acquiesced, and then assigned people from his personal guard to attend to guarding Wei Wuxian's quarters with instructions to keep others out unless invited and to let Wei Wuxian leave whenever he wanted.

Wei Yuan paused when Lan Wangji did, tilting his head to look at him with a confused expression, his small brow furrowed.

"It is nothing," Lan Wangji murmured before he continued inside, pulling Wei Yuan along.

The guards looked surprised to see him, but they were trained enough not to let their surprise show for long. Instead, they merely bowed when he passed before turning back to their posts.

Wei Yuan didn't lose his calm demeanor until they neared Wei Wuxian's rooms. As they drew close Wei Yuan gripped Lan Wangji's hand tighter, almost bouncing forward as he started to walk faster.

Amused, Lan Wangji kept pace with him until they reached the doors to Wei Wuxian's rooms. Lan Wangji gave himself a moment to settle his mind before he knocked and opened the doors.

He was unprepared to find his husband waiting on the other side with the most radiant grin spread across his face.

Beautiful.

Lan Wangji dimly registered Wei Yuan letting go of his hand, his breath catching in his throat when Wei Wuxian's expression abruptly fell.

Within a moment Wei Wuxian lunged forward and scooped Wei Yuan into his arms, turning to the side and tucking him against his chest as he growled at Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji blinked. Wei Wuxian's growl intensified, and before either one could break the tension Wei Yuan slapped his hands against Wei Wuxian's face.

"Baba, no!" Wei Yuan pouted and Wei Wuxian stopped growling, looking at his son. Wei Yuan slapped his hands against Wei Wuxian's face again, and then Wei Wuxian smiled and bit one of his son's hands, a rumbling purr filling the room.

Baffled, Lan Wangji could only watch as Wei Yuan squealed and giggled, prying his hand free and wiping it on Wei Wuxian's robes. Only then did Wei Wuxian seem to realize Lan Wangji was still standing in the doorway.

He stiffened, keeping Wei Yuan turned away as he met Lan Wangji's gaze.

"Although it was unnecessary for you to bring A-Yuan back, this one thanks Hanguang-jun for bringing him here from the nursery," Wei Wuxian calmly said, his voice flat.

"It was no issue," Lan Wangji replied, and Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes then looked Lan Wangji over once more.

"Good. We'll take our leave then," Wei Wuxian said, and then promptly closed the door in Lan Wangji's face.

Lan Wangji blinked in surprise, staring at the door for several moments until he realized it wasn't going to open again. Lan Wangji breathed slowly, clenching his hands before he turned and quickly left the building, heading toward his brother's rooms.

Lan Wangji knelt across from his brother and uncle when he arrived, and they traded their usual greetings before Lan Xichen smiled and asked how things had gone with Wei Yuan. Lan Wangji felt himself frown and he looked away from his brother, staring down at the tea cradled in his hands.

“Brother, I have concerns.”

Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren stilled at his words, Lan Xichen’s expression slipping into one more serious as Lan Wangji recounted what had happened.

Chapter End Notes

Most of this chapter is straight up food porn and I am *not* sorry.

Bonus:
As soon as WWX realized he'd slammed the door in the crown prince's face he panicked, cursing up a storm until MXY returned with their dinner and found him face-down on the floor, groaning while A-Yuan sat on his back.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last time Lan Wangji visited the healer's wing had been during the war.

The Wen's siege on the palace had been strenuous and sudden, and although they had managed to push the Wens from the palace grounds, the wards had been destroyed and many were injured in the process.

Lan Wangji himself had limped away from the battle, ignoring the pain in his leg until they had put out the fires and stopped the Wens from returning through their gates.

Never before had Lan Wangji felt the unrelenting yearning to shift into his true form. To protect his home, the disciples around him, and the history the Wens had almost destroyed. His instincts had wailed long after everything settled into an uneasy stalemate; water bubbling in his throat and ice cresting his arms until Uncle had found him at the palace gates, freezing them shut.

Uncle had quickly sent him to the healer's wing, and Lan Wangji had drifted as the day slipped into night and the healers baulked that the crown prince had been running around on a broken leg.

The injury was minor compared to other cultivators, and Lan Wangji had left as soon as possible, the smell of herbs and blood twisting unpleasantly in the air. *It had smelled like mother.* A sickly-bitter tang that he preferred to avoid lest he find himself spiraling away, numb to everything around him.

Lan Wangji steadied himself and pulled his thoughts together. Uncle and brother had recommended he visit the healer's wing while they did their own research, and he reminded himself that his discomfort was unimportant in the face of his husband's apparent pain.

Lan Wangji stepped into the healer's wing and paused on the threshold. Doctors moved around the room, chatting to one another as they called for various supplies. Since the war ended, few patients needed to stay longer than a few hours, which meant most of the doctors were working calmly with their apprentices, grinding medicines to support the common needs of the palace with little urgency.

Lan Wangji waited until an apprentice walked past, their arms laden with dried flowers. When they saw him they froze, one foot in the air before they squeaked and fumbled into a hasty bow.

"Y-Your highness!"

The room grew quiet when the apprentice chirped their greeting, and everyone turned toward Lan Wangji with varying looks of surprise. Lan Wangji resisted the urge to shift on his feet

and was thankful when the head doctor, Lan Bingzhuo, broke the silence as he walked over and bowed.

“Is something wrong, your highness?”

“No.”

Lan Bingzhuo blinked in apparent surprise. “Then may this one ask for the nature of your visit?”

“Liu Qing,” Lan Wangji replied with a small nod. Lan Bingzhuo’s tail flicked and he furrowed his brow.

“You wish to speak with her?”

“Mn.”

“One moment then, your highness,” Lan Bingzhuo said before he stepped away, disappearing behind one of the privacy screens scattered throughout the room.

Lan Wangji waited patiently, breathing through his mouth to dispel the heavy scent of medicine in the air. Thankfully, the healers had stopped staring and had gone back to their work, and it wasn’t long before Lan Bingzhuo returned with Liu Qing by his side.

“You needed to speak to me, your highness?” Liu Qing asked with a bow, and Lan Wangji glanced at Lan Bingzhuo. Lan Bingzhuo murmured a parting and then quickly returned to his work.

“Yes,” Lan Wangji said, struggling to keep his words within reach. He ran through what Lan Xichen had suggested, and then his gaze caught on the deep purple of Liu Qing’s robes. *Jiang robes.*

The dark colors were a stark contrast to the whites and blues of the other healers in the room.

They should have provided Liu Qing with a set of Lan healer’s robes by now, or should have provided a similar set in Jiang colors to match the Lan style. They had not known Liu Qing was arriving with Wei Wuxian, or they would have had robes prepared upon her arrival, as they had for Wei Wuxian and Wei Yuan.

Not that either wore them, but Lan Wangji could understand the comfort of wearing familiar robes instead of ones in Lan colors. *Except they didn’t wear Jiang colors either.* Aside from the day they arrived, Wei Wuxian and his son wore deep hues of red and black, only the Jiang style hinting at their prior sect.

It wasn’t unheard of to wear different colors than one’s sect, but considering the Jiang had insisted Wei Wuxian didn’t have lingering ties to Wei Yuan’s mother—nor wherever she hailed from—Lan Wangji couldn’t make sense of the discrepancy.

“Your robes,” Lan Wangji said, and Liu Qing startled and glanced at her robes.

“There are no rules against wearing my former sect’s robes,” Liu Qing slowly replied. Lan Wangji slightly tipped his head.

“They are not in the Lan style.”

Liu Qing frowned and brushed her hands against the braces holding back her sleeves.

“With all due respect, your highness,” she replied. “If you came here to discuss my uniform you could have saved time by sending a servant.”

“Wei Wuxian does not wear them either,” Lan Wangji added, avoiding her gaze.

“What does that have to do with…?” Liu Qing asked and then sighed, pressing a hand against her head. Her pale fingers were dyed a dark brown, likely from grinding medicines or poultices that lingered when handled. Lan Wangji knew the scent of those medicines well, and minutely shifted a step away.

“I am not Wei Wuxian’s keeper, nor have I ever succeeded at forcing him to do something he doesn’t want to. You would be better served talking to him yourself, and I should get back to preparing—"

“Wei Wuxian is unwell.”

Liu Qing stilled.

Lan Wangji forced himself to meet her gaze and mentally assigned himself to copy the book of discipline for interrupting. He hadn’t meant to, but if Liu Qing had finished and walked away he wouldn’t have known how to bring her back, how to reach out without demanding her attention in a way that leveraged his power over her.

“Your highness?” Liu Qing hedged with a concerned look.

“Wei Wuxian is unwell and I am concerned,” Lan Wangji repeated, and was unprepared for the anger that flickered to life in Liu Qing’s eyes. She visibility shuddered, clenching her hands before she took a breath and made a small gesture to the room at large.

“Here is not the place to discuss such matters,” Liu Qing said, her voice belaying a calm her posture didn’t. Lan Wangji hesitated, then nodded in understanding.

“We will go where it is private.”

Lan Wangji turned and left the room, expecting her to follow. Liu Qing let out a startled noise then caught up to Lan Wangji, keeping pace as he led her from the healer’s wing and to a courtyard.

This far into the palace the courtyards were seldom used, set aside as private areas for the royal family. Lan Wangji sometimes rested in them with his brother when the weather was nice; content to let time slip by as they shared tea and a few peaceful moments before they were pulled back to their duties.

The courtyards hadn't been regularly used in several generations, however. Not since the royal family was large and the emperor roamed the courtyards freely with his spouse and children.

Which meant that when Lan Wangji stepped into one of the royal family's courtyards, there was no one to be seen aside from the stray servant scuttling past the courtyard's entrance.

Lan Wangji led Liu Qing to a pavilion that overlooked a small pond, gesturing for her to sit as he took a seat. Liu Qing hesitated, taking in the courtyard before she sat and pressed her hands into her lap.

The silence pressed around them, only the faint sounds of birds filling the air. Lan Wangji avoided her gaze until he had pulled his thoughts together and spoke.

"Wei Wuxian is not eating."

Liu Qing stiffened and her anger seemed to drain away, her shoulders sinking toward the floor.

"I know," she replied, pursing her lips.

"And he has lost weight since arriving."

"I am aware."

"Increasing his meals does not appear to have helped," Lan Wangji continued, watching Liu Qing's reaction carefully. "I am usure what is wrong."

Concern crawled its way through Lan Wangji's chest as he waited for her to reply, a tightness pressing against his ribs. Yet, instead of the mirrored concern he expected, Liu Qing's expression shuttered into a blank mask, her eyes growing fierce.

"His highness is unsure what is wrong?" Liu Qing repeated, her words clipped and sharp.

"Mn," Lan Wangji replied, slightly confused. The air around them grew warm, and Lan Wangji reflexively curled his tail around his knees, grounding himself against his instincts that told him to chill the air.

"May I speak freely?" Liu Qing asked, and Lan Wangji tilted his head in agreement. "Without fear of reprisal?" she added.

"Yes. Provided nothing you say will enact harm upon another."

Liu Qing nodded, sucking in a breath before her posture sharpened and she leaned forward. Lan Wangji carefully didn't move from her sudden closeness, reminding himself he had nothing to fear. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Fengmian had vouched for her character, and there were few spirits that could hold their own against the power of a dragon.

It was still unnerving to see, however, especially when she bared her teeth, her calm demeanor completely gone.

“*Of course Wei Wuxian isn’t well!”* Liu Qing snapped, her shoulders trembling. “He’s been forced from his siblings and thrown into an unfamiliar sect. He can’t cultivate properly, let alone find a way to work out his nervous energy. And with a mind like his, sitting in lessons all day will do nothing more than make him *want to crawl out of his skin.*”

Lan Wangji’s eyes widened in alarm, the tightness in his throat threatening to overwhelm him. Lan Wangji knew what it was like to be without a sibling for months at a time, but what had Liu Qing meant about Wei Wuxian’s cultivation? *The servants should have shown him where to—*

“It was bad enough that you tried to take his son—”

He had done *what?*

“—let alone that you’ve kept him locked within his rooms!” Liu Qing hissed and slammed a hand against the table, her breathing ragged. Lan Wangji flinched at the sound her hand made, thoughts spiraling as he tried to make sense of what she was saying.

“Who has told him this?” Lan Wangji eventually managed, alarm slipping into his voice. Liu Qing paused and leaned back, her anger morphing into confusion.

“Who has told him he may not leave?” Lan Wangji repeated and his breathing hitched as a wave of dread washed over him. *Wei Wuxian thought he couldn't leave.*

Like his mother, who Lan Wangji had watched waste away, weight dropping like falling leaves until only snow and silence filled her courtyard.

"I do not know,” Liu Qing slowly said. “But Wei Wuxian told me he couldn’t leave aside from his lessons."

Lan Wangji clenched his hands, unable to speak past the tangle of *wrong* twisting through his chest as the hitch in his breath turned into a gasp.

“...Your highness?”

Lan Wangji startled when Liu Qing spoke and the knot in his chest unraveled. He breathed through the ache, holding onto his wavering composure until it settled around him, calm and quiet and focused. Liu Qing watched him carefully, her fingers twitching against the table.

“The guards were told not to bar Wei Wuxian from leaving his quarters,” Lan Wangji said, folding his trembling hands into his lap. “Wei Wuxian may go where he pleases aside from my brother’s quarters, as is the right of the crown prince’s spouse.”

Liu Qing eyed him warily. “What if he wants to leave the palace?” she asked.

“He may do so with a guard.”

Liu Qing looked surprised, and she opened and closed her mouth several times before she replied.

“But you have not given him a token.”

“New tokens take longer to make due to the new wards.” Lan Wangji had commissioned Wei Wuxian’s token himself, and it was set to be completed within a fortnight.

Lan Wangji relayed this information to Liu Qing and she cursed, letting out a string of colorful language.

“Did you tell him this?”

“I did not," Lan Wangji hesitantly replied.

Liu Qing grimaced and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Did *anyone* tell him?”

“Mo Xuanyu should have. It is no secret that Wei Wuxian would receive one,” Lan Wangji explained. Liu Qing cursed again, and Lan Wangji briefly considered whether or not he needed to send for another healer.

“Wei Wuxian is an idiot.”

Lan Wangji flushed, feeling the urge to protest. Wei Wuxian had been one of the best generals they’d had during the war. Chaotic, yes, but his ideas had been innovative enough to take the Wen by surprise.

He was by no means incompetent.

“Whatever you’re thinking you’re wrong, your highness,” Liu Qing quickly said, letting her hand fall from her face. Warmth brushed the tops of Lan Wangji’s ears and he looked away with a frown.

“Wei Wuxian is brilliant, but I’ve known him long enough to know that you need to tell him yourself about the token and that he’s allowed to leave.”

Lan Wangji looked back at Liu Qing, his brow furrowing. Something about what she said sounded off. *That he’s* allowed *to leave.* Like the Lan were keeping him locked away with no hope for escape, a guarded ward that no one was allowed to see.

Lan Wangji forced himself to hold Liu Qing’s gaze and whatever she saw made her wilt, her expression morphing into something unbearably sad.

“I promise you, he doesn’t know,” she murmured. “For what it’s worth I would have told him had I known.”

“What have I done, to make him think such a thing?” Lan Wangji asked, the uneasiness from before prodding at the edges of his awareness.

“You didn’t—” Liu Qing started and then bit her tongue. She grimaced, fidgeting before she continued. “It’s not my story to tell, but you should know that he does not assume what someone of his status should.”

Lan Wangji stood before he could question his decision, his voice belaying a calm he didn't feel.

"I will remedy this."

It had been Lan Wangji's duty to ensure the servants told Wei Wuxian this information, and that they hadn't and Lan Wangji *hadn't known* was an error he couldn't let continue.

Lan Wangji moved to leave the pavilion and then stopped, looking back at Liu Qing.

"Wei Yuan," Lan Wangji started. "He is scared of things he should not be."

Lan Wangji watched Liu Qing's expression shift, flickering between several emotions too quickly for him to follow. When she didn't respond Lan Wangji continued.

"Did something happen with his mother?"

Lan Wangji knew the weight of losing a parent. Knew the loneliness that followed and the fear of breaking the rules. The fear that burrowed deep for years, holding tightly until it faded enough that Lan Wangji could breathe in the scent of coming snow without feeling dread.

"Wei Wuxian has done nothing but raise Wei Yuan well," Liu Qing replied, much to Lan Wangji's confusion. But perhaps this was Liu Qing's way of telling Lan Wangji that Wei Yuan's mother had never been in the picture.

Lan Wangji hummed in understanding and then left the courtyard, thoughts swirling as he headed to his next meeting.

And it wasn't until Lan Wangji had settled into the meeting, ambassadors vying for his attention while they argued over nothing that Lan Wangji realized that much like Wei Wuxian and his son, Liu Qing hadn't been displaying her features either.

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The second time Hanguang-jun brought A-Yuan back from the nursery Wei Wuxian had been surprised, but he managed not to growl or slam the door in Hanguang-jun's face and took that as a vast improvement, patting himself on the back for his restraint.

Much like the first time, Hanguang-jun had barely spoken. Doing nothing more than greeting Wei Wuxian politely before A-Yuan scampered into Wei Wuxian's arms and Hanguang-jun took his leave.

Hanguang-jun continued bringing A-Yuan back every day, however, and by the end of the week Wei Wuxian was thoroughly confused.

He had tried asking Mo Xuanyu about Hanguang-jun's sudden interest in A-Yuan, and for some reason Mo Xuanyu had flushed, his ears pressed against his head as he stammered *"T-This one doesn't know! I really don't!"* before fleeing the room.

A-Yuan didn't seem to mind the new routine, and so Wei Wuxian resigned himself to the odd encounters, trying to keep the fear from his face when Hanguang-jun returned.

And then Hanguang-jun broke the pattern by asking to stay for tea.

Wei Wuxian froze, his eyes wide as he stared at Hanguang-jun standing politely on the threshold to his rooms. A-Yuan, who had wormed his way into Wei Wuxian's arms upon return, had stilled as well, his hands pressed against Wei Wuxian's chest.

After a few moments Hanguang-jun's expression smoothed, a blank mask as he bowed to Wei Wuxian and took a step back.

"Forgive me for asking," Hanguang-jun said, his voice deep and calm as he turned to leave.

Baffled, Wei Wuxian's jerked into action and scrambled after Hanguang-jun, grabbing one of his sleeves before he could stop himself. Hanguang-jun stilled at the movement, glancing at Wei Wuxian's hand.

Wei Wuxian nervously laughed and released Hanguang-jun's sleeve, wrapping his hand around A-Yuan.

"Forgive me, your highness. But you didn't give me enough time to respond!" Wei Wuxian blurted as he shuffled backwards. Hanguang-jun watched Wei Wuxian carefully, his brow slightly creased.

"I don't mind if you stay for tea," Wei Wuxian added, and then tried not to stare when Hanguang-jun's face softened and the man stepped past Wei Wuxian and into his rooms.

"Mn," Hanguang-jun said as he moved to kneel at the low table, seemingly unconcerned with the numerous paper scraps and discarded snacks strewn across its surface. A crackle of nervous energy ran through Wei Wuxian and he quickly set A-Yuan down, moving to clear the table.

Wei Wuxian babbled about his day as he swept the paper scraps into a qiankun pouch and shoved the snacks aside. Hanguang-jun didn't stop him, nor looked offended as Wei Wuxian rambled and A-Yuan dutifully helped until the table was cleared.

Wei Wuxian then knelt across from Hanguang-jun, shifting in the face of Hanguang-jun's impassive stare. A-Yuan stood between them, looking from Wei Wuxian to Hanguang-jun and back. And then Mo Xuanyu opened the door, calling that he had brought their dinner and tea.

Mo Xuanyu made it several steps into the room before he noticed Hanguang-jun, and when he did he squeaked, fumbling his hold on the tray he was carrying.

Wei Wuxian rolled to his feet and caught the tray before it could fall, then gently pulled it from Mo Xuanyu's hands.

"I-I'm sorry, your highness!" Mo Xuanyu said, curling his tail around his waist as he hastily bowed.

“Aiya, nothing happened,” Wei Wuxian quickly reassured him, waving away his concern. Mo Xuanyu didn’t look convinced, but he did peer around Wei Wuxian to look at Hanguang-jun, and flinched when Hanguang-jun met his gaze.

“This one greets your highness,” Mo Xuanyu said to Hanguang-jun. “He would have brought another serving had he known his highness would be here.”

“It is of no concern,” Hanguang-jun said, his eyes straying to Wei Wuxian. “Tea is sufficient for now.”

Mo Xuanyu nodded and hurried to reach for the tray. Wei Wuxian sighed and lifted the tray out of Mo Xuanyu’s reach, moving toward the table as he ignored Mo Xuanyu’s anxious fluttering. Wei Wuxian set the tray down and pulled a warning talisman from his sleeves, attaching it to the food dishes before he poured tea and handed it to Hanguang-jun.

“Mo Xuanyu, could you take A-Yuan outside to play? I’m sure his highness has stopped by to discuss matters not suited for children’s ears,” Wei Wuxian said, ignoring the way A-Yuan immediately protested and tried to crawl into his lap.

Wei Wuxian grinned and plucked A-Yuan from his lap then handed him to Mo Xuanyu, who looked startled but pulled A-Yuan into his arms. Mo Xuanyu excused himself and carried A-Yuan into the courtyard despite A-Yuan’s whines, and Wei Wuxian watched them until they vanished from sight.

When Wei Wuxian looked back at Hanguang-jun, he found the man staring at him, his expression regal as he sat wrapped in white robes, horns cresting softly from his brow.

Wei Wuxian served himself tea and pressed his hands against the thin porcelain, tension building within him the longer Hanguang-jun didn’t speak. Another minute passed until Wei Wuxian couldn’t stand it anymore and broke the silence.

“Not that it isn’t nice to see you, your highness, but may this one ask for the meaning behind your visit?” Wei Wuxian forced himself to smile, curling his hands tighter around his tea as he itched to *move.* Hanguang-jun’s lips twitched into a frown and Wei Wuxian stiffened. *Had he broken a rule?*

“Lan Wangji,” Hanguang-jun suddenly said, instead of answering Wei Wuxian’s question. Wei Wuxian baulked, and when he didn’t respond the furrow in Hanguang-jun’s brow deepened.

“You may call me Lan Wangji,” Hanguang-jun continued. “We are married.”

Whatever Wei Wuxian had expected him to say, it wasn’t *that.*

“I guess you can call me Wei Wuxian, then?” Wei Wuxian hesitantly offered, and was surprised when Lan Wangji hummed in apparent pleasure, his frown disappearing as he took a drink of tea. Wei Wuxian copied the motion to keep himself occupied, and focused on the warmth of the tea slipping down his throat as he tried to figure out what Lan Wangji was doing here.

Because the crown prince surely had better places to be and more important things to do. He had spent almost a month without visiting Wei Wuxian, *so why would he start now?*

Unless he knew that Wei Wuxian had left the palace, and continued to do so every few days to fill his belly and return before dawn.

Wei Wuxian carefully regulated his breathing as dread crawled up his throat. He had made sure his tampering with the wards hadn't been noticed, and he never spoke of the trips to anyone—not even to A-Yuan. The likelihood Lan Wangji had caught him sneaking out was also low, considering how far the prince's quarters were from Wei Wuxian's.

He *couldn't* know.

"I have erred." Lan Wangji glanced at Wei Wuxian then dropped his gaze to the table, his lips pressing into a minute frown.

Wei Wuxian waited for Lan Wangji's words to make sense, but when they didn't Wei Wuxian cleared his throat.

"Your high—"

Lan Wangji's gaze snapped up and Wei Wuxian winced, correcting himself.

"Lan Wangji, I'm…not sure what you've done wrong?" He asked. Lan Wangji clutched his tea, fingers pressed white against the cup and Wei Wuxian was thrown when he realized that Lan Wangji looked *concerned.*

"I did not intend to trap you here," Lan Wangji quietly said, looking away. "I ask for your forgiveness," he added, then proceeded to pick apart the knot holding his jade token to his belt.

Before Wei Wuxian could register what was happening, Lan Wangji lifted his token and handed it to Wei Wuxian.

"Why are you giving me this?" Wei Wuxian asked, his fingers automatically brushing over the token's carvings. The jade was pure white; dragons etched onto either side with the symbols of the Lan royal family. It was heavy and saturated in protective wards, and Wei Wuxian felt like he was breaking a rule by merely holding it.

"You may go where you wish within the palace," Lan Wangji explained, his posture perfectly straight despite the conflicted expression on his face. Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath and tightened his grip around the token, reeling.

"Anywhere?" Wei Wuxian faintly asked, and Lan Wangji nodded.

"Mn. Except for brother's quarters."

"Of course," Wei Wuxian said, a hysterical laugh escaping him.

Lan Wangji looked concerned by whatever expression Wei Wuxian was making and gestured toward the token, the tips of his ears turning red.

Was he *blushing?*

“Wei Wuxian may use it to leave the palace—”

Wei Wuxian let out a strangled noise.

“—with a guard,” Lan Wangji finished and Wei Wuxian vehemently swore, dropping the token as he buried his face in his hands with a long whine because *what the fuck.*

Had they been testing his loyalty the entire time? Waiting to see if he made a mistake before handing him his freedom?

Waiting ready with the whip for a single mistake? His eyes blown wide as Madam Yu loomed over him, sneering as she doled out her punishment and pain, blinding and sharp until he was sobbing into his knees.

“Wei Wuxian?”

Wei Wuxian shuddered, digging his hands into his hair as tears stung his eyes, hot and painful as his throat closed and he struggled for words.

And what if this was a test? To see if he ran before dragging him back and locking him away?

“Wei Wuxian!” Lan Wangji sharply said and Wei Wuxian gasped, lifting his head. Lan Wangji looked frantic, his eyes wide and hands raised as if he meant to touch Wei Wuxian but had decided against it. Wei Wuxian flinched and quickly pushed the token across the table, waving a hand.

“This one couldn’t possibly take the prince’s own token!” He rambled, trying to calm his shaky breathing. Lan Wangji stilled as if struck, then pursed his lips and pushed the token back.

“It is yours for now,” Lan Wangji sternly said, holding the token in place when Wei Wuxian tried to protest. “You may return it when yours is finished.”

Wei Wuxian paused, looking at Lan Wangji for confirmation.

“I will be getting my own?” Wei Wuxian slowly asked, as Madam Yu’s words echoed in his mind. *Kits like you are lucky to be given a place to stay*. *Do not ask for more.*

Lan Wangji tipped his head and the tension left his shoulders. “Mn. They take longer due to the new wards. You will have yours within a week.”

And *oh.*

Maybe this *was* real, and Lan Wangji meant what he said.

Wei Wuxian curled his hands around the token and watched as Lan Wangji's lips twitched into the smallest smile. It was faint and barely there, but it brought a softness to his face that had Wei Wuxian holding his breath, not wanting to disturb the quiet moment.

"Thank you," Wei Wuxian managed, and Lan Wangji hummed in response. They floated in the silence for several moments, Wei Wuxian running his fingers over the token as he tried to sort through his racing thoughts.

"Are your meals sufficient?" Lan Wangji eventually asked at the same time Wei Wuxian took a drink of tea. Wei Wuxian spluttered, grimacing at the cold tea before he pushed it aside.

"Why wouldn't they be?" Wei Wuxian asked, carefully edging around the question as he plastered on a smile. He doubted the prince would take well to him insulting their food, and it was enough that he could slip out every few nights for a good meal.

He had managed with less food during the war, after all, and even less when he was a child of the streets, fighting dogs for scraps and rinds until his hunger became an open maw that devoured him whole.

Thankfully, Lan Wangji didn't question him further.

"I will let the kitchens know," Lan Wangji said and then stood, his robes billowing around him and his tail slowly brushing against the ground. Lan Wangji dipped his head and started to leave and Wei Wuxian scrambled to his feet.

"Wait, you're leaving?" Wei Wuxian asked and winced at his own demand.

"Mn," Lan Wangji replied, seemingly unperturbed, then left before Wei Wuxian could stare at him any longer, closing the door quietly on his way out.

Wei Wuxian stood there for several minutes, then jumped when the door to the courtyard opened and A-Yuan ran inside and tackled his legs. Unprepared, Wei Wuxian crashed to the floor in a heap—much to A-Yuan's delight—and then he swept A-Yuan into his arms and ferociously tickled his son.

"Baba no! Stop!" A-Yuan laughed, squirming in his grip.

"This is what happens to little foxes who attack their fathers," Wei Wuxian cackled, tickling A-Yuan until they devolved into a giggling heap on the floor. Only then did Wei Wuxian let A-Yuan settle against his chest as he stared at the ceiling, his thoughts churning about what Lan Wangji had said.

Wei Wuxian listened to Mo Xuanyu walk into the room and then gasp, and Wei Wuxian sat up from the floor, holding A-Yuan to his chest. Mo Xuanyu stood near the low table and stared at the token, lifting a shaking hand towards it before backing away as if it might harm him.

"D-Did his highness leave his token here by mistake?" Mo Xuanyu asked, his tail winding around his legs. Wei Wuxian rolled to his feet, swinging A-Yuan onto his shoulders as he

walked over.

“No. He left it for me,” Wei Wuxian said and Mo Xuanyu deflated, letting out a relieved sigh. Mo Xuanyu didn’t look away from the token, however, and Wei Wuxian smirked and scooped the token into his hands. He gave it to A-Yuan who gasped in delight and leaned against Wei Wuxian’s head, clutching it in his hands.

Mo Xuanyu looked horrified and Wei Wuxian grinned, plucking A-Yuan from his shoulders before he knelt at the table and pulled the forgotten food towards them. The talismans had kept the dishes warm, and Wei Wuxian dutifully doled everyone a serving while A-Yuan was distracted by the token.

Mo Xuanyu looked like he wanted to protest but he sighed and accepted the food, kneeling beside A-Yuan. Wei Wuxian had to ply A-Yuan with food to get him to release the token, and then he slipped it into his sleeves and drifted in the gentle warmth of the meal.

The food wasn’t any better than normal, but Wei Wuxian didn’t mind the blandness as much with the weight of the token sitting heavily in his sleeve.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has a lot of feelings and they all hurt, mostly because everyone is a mess. And will continue to be so for awhile longer because things have to get worse before they'll get better. Also, pour one out for all the darlings I had to kill in this chapter because I couldn't make them work. -sobs-

Extra:
WWX falls asleep holding the token that night, and wakes to find A-Yuan stuffing the edge of it into his mouth. WWX isn't sure whether to laugh or cry, and MXY finds them both on the bed when he arrives, WWX howling with tears and rolling around while A-Yuan insists he didn't do anything wrong.

MXY is, appropriately, horrified, and refuses to let the token out of his sight until it's clean and safely attached to WWX's belt.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

-sets this here gently and backs away-

See end notes for content warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey you!”

Mo Xuanyu looked up from the tray he was preparing in the kitchens, his hands freezing over some dishes of congee. The kitchens were busy today—something to do with an upcoming visit from the Jin—and servants bustled around the room, stirring vats of food and collecting finished dishes to deliver to various parts of the palace.

Su She stood at the kitchen’s entrance and Mo Xuanyu fervently hoped the man in charge of the palace servants wasn’t here for him. Su She looked disgruntled, and when Mo Xuanyu quickly dropped his gaze he heard a scoff and the sound of Su She weaving his way across the room.

“I was talking to you,” Su She scowled, stopping before Mo Xuanyu and crossing his arms. Mo Xuanyu winced and bowed, curling his hands into his sleeves.

“Forgive me, Master Su,” Mo Xuanyu murmured, forcing himself not to flinch when Su She let out a sharp *“Tch.”*

“Is that all you can say? Always asking for forgiveness like a beggar,” Su She jeered, then turned and gestured for Mo Xuanyu to follow. “Come. You’re needed elsewhere.”

“But I’m to take his highness Wei Wuxian his lunch—"

“Someone else will handle it,” Su She interrupted as he glanced around the room. “You,” he called and pointed to a servant carrying a tray laden with food. The servant squeaked, their grip on their tray slipping before they caught themselves.

“Y-Yes?” The servant stuttered.

“Once you deliver that, take a tray to his highness Wei Wuxian as well.”

“Of course, sir!” The servant replied, shooting Mo Xuanyu a panicked look as Su She left. Mo Xuanyu gestured to the tray he had prepared before he rushed after Su She, not wanting to be caught lagging behind.

Su She led Mo Xuanyu deeper into the palace, weaving his way through the hallways at a brisk pace. Mo Xuanyu almost had to jog to keep up, and by the time Su She stopped where the hallways shifted into the royal quarters, Mo Xuanyu was out of breath. He distantly noted the area was deserted, and he swallowed against the tension building in his throat.

“M-Master Su, may I ask why we’re here?” Mo Xuanyu asked, keeping his eyes on the floor as his tail curled around his waist. Su She scoffed, and Mo Xuanyu chanced meeting his eyes then involuntarily stepped back when he saw Su She’s twisted expression.

“His highness, Lan Wangji, wants to see you,” Su She said with a smirk, his tone falsely light as if being asked to be seen by crown prince was a normal occurrence. Fear trickled through Mo Xuanyu and he tucked his hands into his sleeves, digging his fingers into his arms.

“Maybe he’s finally decided to get rid of you,” Su She continued, stepping closer. Mo Xuanyu pressed his ears against his head and backed up until he ran into a wall. Cornered, he curled into himself, hunching his shoulders as Su She towered over him.

“Because he wouldn’t want you getting *too close* to Wei Wuxian, right?” Su She sneered, leaning closer. Mo Xuanyu flinched, his face flushing as he trembled, unable to stop the growing panic from sinking its claws into his throat.

He hadn’t—

“Dragons are very *possessive*, after all,” Su She mused, his voice dipping low, a threat despite the thin smile gracing his face.

Mo Xuanyu whimpered, almost sinking to the floor before Su She chuckled and stepped away. Mo Xuanyu watched him warily, unable to respond and knowing that anything he said wouldn’t make a difference.

“I’d get going if I were you. His highness is in his office and I wouldn’t keep a dragon waiting,” Su She added, then turned and vanished down the hallway as he left the royal quarters.

Mo Xuanyu shuddered when Su She disappeared, breath stuttering as his heart hammered in his chest. *The crown prince wanted to see him.* He dug his fingers deeper into his arms, and the pain was the only thing that kept him from collapsing.

Lan Wangji always seemed calm when visiting Master Wei, but he had never called upon Mo Xuanyu personally before and being noticed by those with power never spelled a good outcome. A fresh ripple of fear flooded Mo Xuanyu and he staggered, blinking back tears.

Mo Xuanyu pushed himself from the wall, straightening as best he could as he dragged his sleeves over his eyes. He took several deep, shuddery breaths, uncurled his tail from his waist, then hurried into the royal quarters and prayed he wasn’t too late.

Mo Xuanyu timidly knocked when he reached Lan Wangji’s office and waited for his highness to call a greeting before he stepped inside and bowed low.

“This servant greets your highness,” Mo Xuanyu managed, keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

“Mn, thank you for coming,” Lan Wangji murmured, his voice several shades calmer than Mo Xuanyu had expected. Mo Xuanyu stilled in surprise then looked at his highness.

Lan Wangji was dressed in less formal robes; ones he often wore when bringing young Master Wei back from the nursery. He was seated at his desk, poised and regal and looking every inch of the powerful crown prince that he was as he shuffled through what looked like missives, his eyes skimming the one he held before he set it aside and looked at Mo Xuanyu.

Mo Xuanyu gulped and dropped his gaze, resisting the urge to bow again. He waited for Lan Wangji to speak, and when he didn’t Mo Xuanyu dared to lift his head. Mo Xuanyu jumped when he realized his highness was staring and he shifted on his feet, anxiously pulling his tail into his hands and mindlessly tugging at his fur.

Several agonizing seconds passed and then Lan Wangji blinked, the smallest furrow forming between his brows. Mo Xuanyu held his breath, his thoughts churning into a tangle of what he might have done wrong until he was minutely trembling.

“You are frightened.”

Mo Xuanyu startled when Lan Wangji broke the silence and he clutched his tail, shuffling backwards and babbling apologies before he even registered what Lan Wangji had said. When he did he quickly shook his head and fluttered his hands.

“It would be an insult for t-this servant to fear you,” Mo Xuanyu stammered, bowing again.

“Do not lie,” Lan Wangji replied and Mo Xuanyu snapped his head up, eyes wide. *He knew.* Mo Xuanyu bit his tongue, his shoulders shaking. Lan Wangji watched him carefully then gestured to the space in front of him.

“You are not in trouble,” Lan Wangji calmly said as his expression smoothed into a blank mask.

“I’m not?” Mo Xuanyu blurted and then slapped a hand over his mouth, an anxious whine threatening to spill from his lips.

“En,” Lan Wangji confirmed, then gestured to the space in front of his desk again. “Sit.”

Relief trickled through Mo Xuanyu and he hesitantly shuffled toward the desk and knelt several paces away, wary of kneeling too close to Lan Wangji. His highness studied him, looking at the wide space between them before he let out a puff of air and spoke again.

“Wei Wuxian was not told he could freely leave his rooms.”

“Wait, he can?” Mo Xuanyu asked then winced, knowing he shouldn’t question Lan Wangji’s words. Thankfully Lan Wangji didn’t berate him, but nodded as if Mo Xuanyu answered a pressing question.

“You are surprised,” Lan Wangji added, and Mo Xuanyu quickly shook his head.

“T-This one meant no disrespect, your highness! I never thought you were keeping him there, but I didn’t know he could leave,” Mo Xuanyu rambled, heat rushing to his face as Lan Wangji’s expression turned dark.

“Forgive this one for his oversight!” Mo Xuanyu babbled, pressing himself against the floor. “I will accept any punishment you deem fit.”

Mo Xuanyu held his breath, waiting for Lan Wangji to round the low table and press his boot into the back of his neck, *keeping him where he belonged—*

“Mo Xuanyu.”

Mo Xuanyu froze, spots dancing at the edge of his vision as he pressed himself lower, ears flattened against his head. He heard a soft shuffling, the sound of heavy robes swishing in the silence before a shadow loomed over him. *Don’t movedon’tmovedon’tmove.*

The shadow shifted, and then robes brushed the top of his hands. When nothing happened, Mo Xuanyu lifted his head to find the crown prince *sitting in front of him,* face minutely pinched and hands pressed into his lap.

Lan Wangji held Mo Xuanyu’s gaze, watching him carefully and calmly until Mo Xuanyu remembered to breathe.

Mo Xuanyu gasped at the rush of air, dizzy for a few seconds until he regained his bearings. Lan Wangji still hadn’t moved and Mo Xuanyu eyed him warily, his breath threatening to hitch.

“You are not in trouble,” Lan Wangji gently murmured and Mo Xuanyu slowly relaxed, keeping his eyes on Lan Wangji as he shakily pushed himself from the floor. Lan Wangji nodded once Mo Xuanyu was kneeling upright and let out a soft rumble.

“I only wish to understand,” Lan Wangji added and Mo Xuanyu hesitantly bobbed his head.

“What does his highness wish to know?” Mo Xuanyu asked, relaxing fully as he settled his tail around his lap and absently smoothed his fur. Lan Wangji considered the question and then spoke, a crease reappearing between his brows.

“Does Wei Wuxian dislike Lan robes?”

Mo Xuanyu tilted his head in confusion, waiting for Lan Wangji to clarify. When he didn’t Mo Xuanyu cleared his throat. “Your highness, this one does not know what you are speaking of.”

Lan Wangji frowned, his tail thumping against the ground. “Wei Wuxian is my husband. I sent him robes befitting his status,” Lan Wangji explained. “If he has shown dislike for the Lan colors I will remedy the situation.”

Lan Wangji let out a breath when he finished, seemingly satisfied with his explanation. Mo Xuanyu stared and waited for his highness's words to make sense. *He sent Lan robes?*

"This one…" Mo Xuanyu trailed off, fumbling for an appropriate response before he gave up and wilted, praying his highness wouldn't be mad. "I never received any robes to give to his highness Wei Wuxian."

Lan Wangji's tail thumped again.

"You did not…" Lan Wangji visibly hesitated, hands flexing in his lap. "Does he cultivate?"

Mo Xuanyu fumbled to rearrange his thoughts, thrown by the sudden change in conversation.

"I-I think so?" Mo Xuanyu eventually said, tensing when Lan Wangji continued to stare, as if waiting for further explanation. "…At night sometimes? This one watches young Master Wei whenever his highness cultivates in the courtyard."

"I watched his highness Wei Wuxian practice only once. He is most impressive, even when he's not cultivating with a sword," Mo Xuanyu added. Lan Wangji had looked mollified when he had started speaking, then abruptly stilled.

"He does not use his sword?"

Mo Xuanyu shook his head with a small frown.

"No one may carry a sword within the royal quarters," Mo Xuanyu said and then quickly added, "E-Except for you, your highness!"

Lan Wangji pressed his lips together and Mo Xuanyu hunched his shoulders. Before Mo Xuanyu could apologize for what he had said wrong, Lan Wangji stood.

"You are dismissed," he said then moved around the low table, reclaiming his seat in front of the piles of paper. Mo Xuanyu spluttered, then quickly dipped into a bow before scrambling to his feet and fleeing the room.

And then he hurried through the palace, anxious to return to the servant's quarters as his highness's questions swirled in his mind.

***

Lan Wangji was particularly quiet as he sat across from Wei Wuxian, his pale hands wrapped around his tea and his eyes never lifting from the table.

Ever since Lan Wangji had given Wei Wuxian his token, he had asked to stay for tea each afternoon after returning A-Yuan.

Wei Wuxian had been hesitant at first, not knowing what his highness wanted from the meetings. But Lan Wangji had never pressed him for anything, and simply asked Wei Wuxian about his day as he slowly sipped his tea.

The crown prince surely had better things to do, but he listened attentively when Wei Wuxian spoke. He nodded and hummed in response to whatever Wei Wuxian rambled about, and didn't seem to mind when Wei Wuxian inevitably delved into tangents.

Instead, Lan Wangji would ask thoughtful questions or gently redirect Wei Wuxian back to his original point. Wei Wuxian had stilled the first time Lan Wangji had done so, worried that he had stepped too far, spoken too much, *no one wanted to hear him ramble* but Lan Wangji had nodded and asked him to continue.

Wei Wuxian had awkwardly laughed, insisting that he hadn't meant to take up his highness's time with nonsense. Lan Wangji had frowned, his face pinching minutely before he stated that *"Nothing Wei Wuxian said was nonsense."*

Wei Wuxian had wheezed at that, lamented his poor heart couldn't take it, and had theatrically fallen over—much to Lan Wangji's immediate concern.

Wei Wuxian had relaxed into the meetings since then, not needing much input from Lan Wangji before he started rattling off what he was currently working on in lessons or presented his latest talisman ideas.

But today something about Lan Wangji seemed…off.

He had greeted Wei Wuxian as he normally did, releasing A-Yuan to run outside with Mo Xuanyu before he knelt at the low table they usually shared. His expression was as placid as ever, but something about his posture had prevented Wei Wuxian from talking, had told him to hold his tongue and *wait.*

Wei Wuxian poured them tea, and Lan Wangi curled his hands around his cup, staring into the murky water until he finally met Wei Wuxian's gaze. Wei Wuxian's breath caught at Lan Wangji's pained expression, and then Lan Wangji dropped his gaze back to his tea.

Wei Wuxian uneasily sipped his tea then grimaced when he burnt his tongue. He almost made a joke of it, and then Lan Wangji reached for Wei Wuxian's hand.

Wei Wuxian paused, watching as Lan Wangji's hand stilled above his own, his fingers minutely twitching before he pulled his hand away. Lan Wangji's lips pressed into a frown and then he abruptly stood, not looking at Wei Wuxian as he dipped his head.

"Forgive me. There is something I remembered I must do," he said, then promptly turned and left.

Lan Wangji vanished before Wei Wuxian could stop him.

Then the door to the courtyard slid open and Wei Wuxian jumped, unprepared for when A-Yuan bolted inside and dove into his lap.

"Cold!" A-Yuan chirped, burrowing into his robes as Mo Xuanyu stumbled inside, his hair in disarray and breathing shaky.

“Young Master Wei, you cannot just—” Mo Xuanyu started, then cut himself off when he realized Lan Wangji wasn’t in the room. Wei Wuxian automatically wrapped his sleeves around A-Yuan then turned to Mo Xuanyu, letting out a weak laugh.

“His highness, ah, remembered he had somewhere to be,” Wei Wuxian said, tightening his arms around A-Yuan. Mo Xuanyu frowned, glancing between the door and Wei Wuxian before he deflated.

“I’m sure it must have been important, for his highness to have left early,” Mo Xuanyu offered and Wei Wuxian waved him off. *His highness could do what he wanted.* It wasn’t like Wei Wuxian had the power to stop him.

“No!” A-Yuan said and squirmed in Wei Wuxian’s arms, flailing until he managed to work his way to the floor. He shook himself then slapped his hands against Wei Wuxian’s chest and face, and Wei Wuxian squawked when one of A-Yuan’s hands ended up in his mouth.

“Baba’s important!” A-Yuan said, nodding sagely as he patted Wei Wuxian’s chest. Wei Wuxian gently plucked his son’s hand from his mouth and fondly smiled, moving to ruffle A-Yuan’s hair.

“Aiya, little one, the crown prince is important too,” Wei Wuxian replied, then bit back his laughter when A-Yuan frowned and puffed his cheeks. Bemused, Wei Wuxian stood and scooped A-Yuan into his arms then walked over to Mo Xuanyu.

“It sounds like this kit needs dinner and a bath,” Wei Wuxian said. Mo Xuanyu slowly smiled before he covered his mouth with a hand at A-Yuan’s loud protest.

“Of course, Master Wei. And if he’s good, I’m sure Master Wei will tell him a story before bed.”

A-Yuan froze at the mention of a story, then vaulted from Wei Wuxian’s arms and ran to the low table, kneeling and glaring at them as if they weren’t moving fast enough. Wei Wuxian laughed and joined his son, tutting as Mo Xuanyu slipped away to get their dinner.

By the time they had eaten and wrangled A-Yuan through a bath, A-Yuan was out cold, barely moving as Wei Wuxian tucked him into his bed. Wei Wuxian brushed a hand over his forehead, smoothing A-Yuan’s hair before he turned to find Mo Xuanyu standing close by.

“Will Master Wei be cultivating this evening?” Mo Xuanyu asked. Wei Wuxian grinned and walked past him, stepping behind a privacy screen to change his clothes.

“I will. This one will need to bother you to watch over A-Yuan,” he quietly said as he changed, not wanting to disturb A-Yuan. Mo Xuanyu made an affirmative sound, and had curled himself next to the bed by the time Wei Wuxian stepped back around the privacy screen.

Wei Wuxian had offered to find something for the teen to sit on awhile back, not wanting him to hurt himself from sitting on the floor beside the bed, but Mo Xuanyu had insisted he was fine. Wei Wuxian had huffed, then dragged over several blankets and turned them into a

small nest. Mo Xuanyu had turned bright red when Wei Wuxian had cajoled him into the nest, but he had also squeaked out a small *"T-Thank you!"* and continued using the nest whenever Wei Wuxian left.

Wei Wuxian looked Mo Xuanyu over as he moved to leave, a purr threatening to escape him at the sight of the teen wrapped pleasantly within the blankets. Mo Xuanyu chirped a goodbye, and Wei Wuxian chuckled to himself as he headed into the courtyard and closed the door behind him.

The air was crisp when he stepped outside, cold in a way that signaled the oncoming change of seasons. He had learned from Mo Xuanyu that there was little time between summer and winter this far north, and he shivered at the thought of snow arriving before long.

Wei Wuxian tightened his robes around himself and quickly ducked through the courtyard and over the palace walls before heading into the forest.

The forest was dark tonight; the moon less than a sliver and hidden behind clouds. Wei Wuxian carefully slipped through the forest towards Caiyi, his steps practiced and light. The forest was silent around him and he moved quickly, weaving like a shadow until he reached Caiyi.

Wei Wuxian relaxed as he stepped from the forest and into Caiyi and blended into the bustling night market. The merchant's calls and the smell of savory food washed over him, familiar and welcoming as he wandered. He floated from stall to stall, haggling for food and eating multiple skewers of meat and candied hawthorns until the gnawing pain in his stomach settled.

He wasn't full, but these days he never was until the end of his nightly trips.

Wei Wuxian bit into a candied hawthorn as he walked, yanking it from the skewer as the sour-sweet taste burst in his mouth. He hummed in pleasure, then crunched down on the last hawthorn, savoring its stickiness as he glanced over different stalls.

This late into the night the merchants had tucked away their usual things, putting away children's toys and everyday talismans in favor of pulling out intricately crafted wares. Hairpins and jewelry chimed alongside lanterns and other baubles, and Wei Wuxian found himself slowing to look at a stand selling tassels.

They were crafted in whites, blues, and greens, and Wei Wuxian looked them over as the stall's owner dealt with another customer. A few tassels were carved into the shape of common spirits, and there were flowers representing each sect strewn throughout. Wei Wuxian huffed at the peonies, shaking his head and turning to leave when a deep blue tassel caught his eye.

He picked up the tassel before he could stop himself, running his fingers over the tiny flowers carved onto a hazy blue jade.

They matched the flowers in his courtyard, and reminded him of Lan Wangji.

“Looking for something for your wife?” someone asked and Wei Wuxian jolted, setting the tassel down as the vendor leaned over their wares with a grin. The man looked like an otter spirit and he gestured to his wares proudly.

Wei Wuxian waved a hand and laughed, his cheeks flushing. *Wife? What wife did he have? If anything, he was the wife in this situation—*

“Just admiring your fine work,” Wei Wuxian said, taking a step back.

“Ah, but that means you’ve a lovely woman who’d deserve such fine wares, no?”

Wei Wuxian’s gaze flickered to the tassel he had been holding, and he faintly wondered what Lan Wangji would look like wearing it on his belt.

Seeing Wei Wuxian’s look, the merchant launched into a lively description of the tassel, describing the craftsmanship and highlighting the jade’s quality. Wei Wuxian felt himself drift forward, aptly listening as the merchant lifted the tassel and slowly spun it.

He didn’t think Lan Wangji wore three accessories already, which meant that he could wear the tassel and it would contrast nicely against his white robes and—

Wei Wuxian caught himself before he could reach for the tassel, blinking and shuffling backwards.

“Forgive me, but my wife’s already cut off my spending,” he blurted, wincing when the merchant’s face fell into a knowing look. The man nodded sagely and set the tassel down.

“This one understands, but when she loosens her hold I’ll be here,” he grinned, then turned as someone else stepped up to the stand. Wei Wuxian quickly left, face still warm as he berated himself and worked his way to his favorite inn.

He had tried eating at a few different inns over the past few weeks, and quickly found that the waitress at the first inn he had tried hadn’t been bragging—their food was the best on this side of town. When Wei Wuxian realized this, he had spent the remainder of his nights at this inn; spending enough time and money that the waitress knew him by sight.

The inn was fuller than normal when he stepped inside, clients rowdy and cheerful as they crowded around tables and food permeated the air with a mouthwatering scent. The pipa woman was sitting on the small stage, and the tables near her were full of men calling out suggestive song requests—much to the amusement of everyone involved, if their loud laughter was any indication.

A few of the men appeared to be cultivators based on their robes and swords, and Wei Wuxian carefully skirted past them as they boasted about night hunting and claimed to have taken down demonic beasts on the outskirts on Caiyi.

As if the Lans would allow demonic beasts anywhere near here.

Wei Wuxian shook his head and sat at an open table near the back of the room far from the cultivators. He didn’t recognize them, but his memory was shotty at best and there was a

small chance they might recognize him from the war. *Better to stay far away.*

The waitress caught his eye and waved, finishing an order before she weaved her way over with a smile.

“The usual, yeah?” She asked and he grinned, resting his chin on his hand. For the life of him he couldn’t remember her name, but her rabbit features were easy to spot and she never seemed to mind when he avoided her questions about his name and where he came from.

Instead, she would laugh about how it must be good fortune that his travels allowed him to return so frequently, and then would lament that his features must be unique, for him to keep them hidden.

“Or ugly,” he had offered once and she had grinned, piling extra jars of Emperor’s Smile onto his table and insisting they were on the house.

“This traveling one is as starving as ever,” he replied.

“The usual then,” the waitress confirmed before she gestured to the crowd. “Although it might take a bit longer. We’ve a lot of cultivators tonight, and the lot are always rowdy when they’re not from Gusu Lan,” she added with a grimace.

Wei Wuxian chuckled and waved her off, insisting that he didn’t mind. He let his thoughts drift as he waited and his hands skimmed his belt, brushing over where Lan Wangji’s token normally hung.

Wei Wuxian removed it whenever he came to Caiyi, worried that someone might recognize the crown prince’s token and question why he had it. It felt odd, however, not to have the token hanging on his belt.

He had gotten used to its weight, to its gentle sway when he walked, and to the way it felt under his hands late at night. He’d skim his fingers over the intricate carvings as he laid in bed, keeping his movements small and wondering why Lan Wangji hadn’t given it to him sooner.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!” a man shouted and Wei Wuxian looked across the room when a loud *crash* rang out.

The waitress stood near the group of cultivators with her arms full of food, a broken dish shattered at her feet. The cultivator closest to her glared and slammed a fist onto the table, his voice sharp as he berated her for her error.

Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath and clenched his hands, forcing himself not to intervene as the cultivator yelled. *He couldn’t draw attention to himself.* The waitress apologized, setting down her food and hurriedly sweeping the broken pieces into a pile.

The cultivator complained loudly as she worked, demanding compensation until she promised to bring more wine. Wei Wuxian bit his tongue and glared at the cultivators, cursing

them out in his mind until the waitress retrieved her food and delivered it to him with a pinched expression.

Wei Wuxian reached into his sleeves then quietly pushed a few coins across the table as he held her gaze. “For your trouble,” he said and the tension drained from her shoulders. She faintly smiled as she pocketed the coins and thanked him, then boasted about the quality of tonight’s food before she walked away.

The food smelled heavenly and Wei Wuxian quickly tucked into his meal, rumbling in satisfaction as spices flooded his mouth and warmed his stomach. He chased each dish with a jar of Emperor’s Smile and sighed at the fact that nothing from Lotus Pier could compare.

The cultivators left when Wei Wuxian was halfway through his meal and the atmosphere in the inn immediately lightened. The pipa woman smiled and started plucking an upbeat tune—much to the crowd’s pleasure—and Wei Wuxian enjoyed the music as he finished his meal and wine.

When Wei Wuxian finally stood to leave, he abruptly realized he might’ve had more wine than intended.

The room swayed when he stood and he quickly steadied himself against the table, blinking until the room stopped spinning. He shook his head and immediately regretted it as the room dipped again, and he pressed a hand to his temple, rubbing away the steady throb building there.

He had only had three jars.

He had drunk more than twice that amount before at Lotus Pier without getting drunk. But Wei Wuxian was tired, and his weeks spent in the palace might have finally destroyed his tolerance.

Wei Wuxian managed to stumble from the inn and waived at the waitress, hiccupping as he stepped outside. The air was colder than when he first arrived and he whined, pulling his robes tighter around himself. *Stupid Lans, living where it was cold!*

He rubbed his hands together and slowly looked around until he remembered where he was, then lurched forward and worked his way out of Caiyi.

Leaving town took longer than it should have, and by the time Wei Wuxian stepped into the forest his body felt sluggish and heavy, his eyes drifting closed. He leaned against a tree and sucked in a breath, and swallowed past the nausea rolling in his stomach.

Maybe the wine had been stronger than he thought.

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes and stumbled forward, holding onto trees to stop himself from tripping over his feet.

He had been walking for some time when he realized he wasn’t on the path he normally took back to the palace, nor could he make out the path in the darkness around him. He cursed

loudly at the sky—as if that might bring back the moon—and abruptly wished Jiang Cheng was with him.

They had stumbled home together many nights after drinking too much, leaning on one another and roughhousing until they reached Lotus Pier. Jiang Cheng would let Wei Wuxian cling to him on those nights and wouldn't protest when Wei Wuxian whined and pulled on his robes or collapsed in his room to sleep.

Jiang Cheng merely grumbled about Wei Wuxian taking up too much space in bed before joining him. And then in the morning Jiang Cheng would angrily yell when Wei Wuxian inevitably kicked him off the bed or stole all the blankets in his sleep.

Once, they had returned thoroughly drunk after celebrating the end of the war and drinking their weight in wine. Wei Wuxian had groaned about the room being too cold until Jiang Cheng shifted into his spirit form and hauled Wei Wuxian against him.

Wei Wuxian had fallen asleep to Jiang Cheng purring around him, and had woken to the soft rasp of Jiang Cheng's tongue over his ears. He had basked in the feeling until Jiang Cheng realized what he was doing and screeched as he threw Wei Wuxian from his bed.

Wei Wuxian had been in tears laughing, rolling around on the floor until his sister had come running. She had chided them properly then brushed her hand against Wei Wuxian's head, and he had realized he had let his features show. He had hidden them quickly, and thankfully his siblings hadn't mentioned the incident since.

"Who would even care?" Wei Wuxian asked as he walked, swaying in the darkness. "Except for Madam Yu," he added after some thought. "*Fuck* Madam Yu."

He cackled loudly, covering his mouth with a hand before he elegantly ran into a sharp branch. He chittered at the branch and fumbled to tug himself free, pulling at his robes until the branch broke and his tails unfurled behind him.

Wei Wuxian almost tripped, stumbling to balance himself against the weight of his tails.

"So heavy!" He complained with a laugh, wheezing as he held his side. *So many tails for people to hate!*

And they didn't even know difficult they were to care for, or how heavy they were to carry.

"Other spirits are lucky. They only have one," Wei Wuxian grumbled, continuing forward. Their tails weighed nothing! *Unless the Lans' tails were heavy? Had anyone ever felt the weight of a dragon's tail aside from the dragons themselves?* Even if they were heavy, there was probably a rule that prevented the Lans from complaining about it.

Would Lan Wangji's tail be heavy?

Wei Wuxian stepped over a bush, tripped, then steadied himself against a tree. He shivered as he pictured Lan Wangji curling his tail around him, *protective and warm and safe* in a way that *ached.*

That made Wei Wuxian wail into the dark and long for his siblings until he shuddered and dug his hands into the bark of the tree, trying and failing to ground himself.

“You’d think the Lans would keep a tight leash on something so valuable,” a voice said and Wei Wuxian froze, a chill sweeping through him. “And noisy.”

A man stepped from the shadows and onto the path in front of Wei Wuxian, barely visible in the darkness. He wore dark robes and his features were hidden, and when Wei Wuxian looked at his face it was shrouded in an unnatural darkness, hazy and indistinct despite the clarity of his voice.

The man stepped toward Wei Wuxian, then reached into his sleeves and pulled out a knife.

Shit.

Wei Wuxian stepped back and circulated his spiritual energy, trying to negate the effects of the wine, and his breath caught when nothing happened. He hesitated then tried to hide his features, and a ripple of fear washed over him when *nothing happened.*

Dread churned in his gut and he whined, trying and failing again to hide his features as the man walked closer.

“Tell me,” the man said nonchalantly, as if he was holding a normal conversation instead of staring down a *huli jing*. “How many tails has Hanguang-jun taken to feed his own cultivation?”

“Lan Wangji wouldn’t—” Wei Wuxian started then cut himself off, biting his tongue. Wei Wuxian took another step back and fervently wished he had suibian. He at least had some talismans in his sleeves, and he fumbled to pull them out and prayed he grabbed something useful.

“Surely a few more won’t be missed,” the man added then lunged, his knife flashing.

Wei Wuxian shoved a talisman in the man’s hazy face as the knife brushed his arm and left a trail of pain in its wake. Gritting his teeth, Wei Wuxian sent a burst of spiritual energy through the talisman—

And nothing happened.

The talisman laid limp against the man’s nothingness of a face, and then the man cursed and ripped the talisman away before tackling Wei Wuxian to the ground.

The world spun and Wei Wuxian hit the forest floor *hard.* His vision blurred and he gasped when the man landed on top of him and pressed against his chest, pinning him down as he started tearing at Wei Wuxian’s robes.

Dazed, Wei Wuxian hissed when the knife cut into him, the pain clearing his vision enough for him to punch the man in the face. But his arm refused to move properly, and he missed twice before his fist connected and a *crunch* rang out as he knocked the man away.

"Fucking huli jing!" The man spat as Wei Wuxian scrambled to his feet. He managed to take a step before the man returned and dove at Wei Wuxian's waist, knocking him over. Wei Wuxian's chin glanced off a branch and blood coated his neck before the man roughly shoved his face into the dirt.

Wei Wuxian wheezed and tried to push himself from the ground, and then the man sat on his back and Wei Wuxian's arms crumpled under the weight. He struggled uselessly as the man pressed harder and sliced open his robes.

And then pain bloomed over Wei Wuxian's back, blinding and sharp as the man dug the knife into the base of his tails.

It burned.

The pain overwhelmed Wei Wuxian for a moment, his stomach heaving until its contents coated the ground and he choked. *He couldn't breathe.* The man yanked on Wei Wuxian's tails and the pain flared brighter, and Wei Wuxian desperately shoved his hands against the ground and threw his weight backwards.

The man let out a garbled yell when his weight shifted, and Wei Wuxian heaved until he slipped free and staggered to his feet.

He didn't stick around to make sure the man didn't follow him.

Instead, he turned and *ran,* stumbling through the forest as he swayed and black spots dotted his vision, pain rippling through him.

It burned.

He didn't know how he made it back to the palace.

One moment he had been racing through the forest as the sounds of the man faded, and the next he was stealing over the palace walls near the main gate.

Wei Wuxian barely managed to evade the guards as he climbed onto a roof, his feet slipping several times before he hauled himself over the edge. He panted as he hurried over the rooftops, moving through the palace until he fell into the courtyard outside his rooms.

The grass was cool against his face when he landed and he laid there for several moments, shaking until he could move.

He then staggered into his rooms, sliding open the door and leaning heavily against the wall. His hand slipped in his own blood and his back *burned,* waves of pain licking up his spine with each step he took.

Shijie, it hurt.

Wei Wuxian dimly registered someone calling his name and then he collapsed, sinking into the darkness that swiftly dragged him under.

Chapter End Notes

WWX has joined the MXY protection squad, and LWJ is close behind because *someone* needs to protect the poor boy.

I'm sorry for the (literal) knives, but I promise things will get better. TnT

CW: Non-consensual drug use and assault

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I had to cut this chapter in half, and the fluff got stuck in the second half. TuT

But I finally wrangled this chapter into submission and it's my birthday so please enjoy the angst. ＼(￣▽￣)／

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wei Wuxian surfaced from the syrupy blackness clouding his mind, thoughts sluggish as he struggled to breathe through the pain.

Someone was crying.

"—but his back!"

"Looks worse than it actually is."

Wei Wuxian tried opening his eyes but they refused to move. A fresh wave of dizziness rolled over him and he whined, wishing he could curl into himself and away from the pain.

"A-Xian, go back to sleep," someone said and he felt a hand carding through his hair.

He panted, leaning into the hand as he shuddered. *"Shijie, it hurts."* The hand paused then continued moving, soothing and rhythmic until Wei Wuxian slipped into the darkness dragging him under.

***

Wei Wuxian woke to the morning sun filtering into his room.

He was lying on his stomach with nothing more than a light blanket strewn over his lower back and his body ached; a dull throb pounding in his head as he swallowed against the nausea lurching through him.

He forced himself to breathe and looked around. Wen Qing stood on the other side of the room, her back to him as she washed her hands in a basin. The low table beside her was covered in bloody rags, and he winced at the smattering of herbs and needles strewn across it.

At least they hadn't taken him to the healer's wing.

Wei Wuxian froze when he saw Mo Xuanyu curled beside the bed, asleep in the nest Wei Wuxian had made him. His sleeves were flecked with blood, robes falling off his shoulder

and hair disheveled, and an errant belt lay discarded on the floor next to a pile of bloody robes.

What had happened?

Wei Wuxian searched Mo Xuanyu's face, but the only indication anything was wrong was the dark circles under his eyes and the way he kept twitching in his sleep. Something shifted in Mo Xuanyu's arms, and Wei Wuxian stiffened when he realized A-Yuan was sleeping on Mo Xuanyu's lap.

Mo Xuanyu had wrapped his outer robes around A-Yuan and tucked him against his chest, where his hands gripped Mo Xuanyu's inner robes like a lifeline. A-Yuan looked like he had been crying, and he let out whimpers that urged Wei Wuxian to sweep him into his arms.

Wei Wuxian's fingers barely twitched when he tried moving, however, and a sinking feeling crawled through him when he tried again and nothing happened.

"You're awake."

Wei Wuxian looked up when Wen Qing spoke, unable to move or whine as his breathing hitched. Wen Qing frowned then swiftly crossed the room, leaning over him and pulling a needle from his neck before his limbs started responding

"I had to keep you from shifting in your sleep," Wen Qing explained as she tucked the needle away, her expression pinched in concern. "Don't try moving too quickly."

Wei Wuxian sluggishly pushed himself from the bed, vision swimming as he tried focusing on Wen Qing. She blurred and then he heaved, stomach rolling as he lurched over the side of the bed.

Wen Qing barely managed to shove a bedpan under him before he threw up what little was left in his stomach, the bile burning his throat. Tears pricked his eyes as his stomach continued clenching, and he was shaking by the time his stomach stopped threatening to upend itself into the bedpan.

Wen Qing gently brushed his hair from his face, setting the bedpan aside before helping him settle back on his stomach. Wei Wuxian didn't want to lay down completely though, and he struggled to keep his hands underneath him until Wen Qing caught on and propped him up by shoving several pillows under his chest.

The movement pulled on his back but the pain felt dulled, quiet and shimmering compared to the raging inferno he remembered before passing out.

"Whatever you were drugged with was stronger than I anticipated," Wen Qing said as she knelt down. "I tried flushing it from your system, but I had to let most of it run its course."

"Is that why I feel like shit?" Wei Wuxian rasped and Wen Qing nodded before tugging on his wrist and taking his pulse.

"That, and because someone tried to cut your tails off," she added and Wei Wuxian flinched.

Wei Wuxian lifted himself and looked over his shoulder, sweat beading on his brow as pain flared in his back. His lower back was buried under the thin blanket, and when he tried to move the blanket Wen Qing rapped his hand.

“The blanket needs to stay.”

“But Qing-jie, you’ve seen me naked before!” He playfully whined and Wen Qing scowled.

“You’ll hurt yourself, you idiot,” she chided, only for them to pause when they noticed Mo Xuanyu stirring.

Mo Xuanyu blinked sleepily and rubbed his eyes, his hands trembling. A-Yuan moved in his lap and Mo Xuanyu loosened his grip as A-Yuan woke, then squeaked when he saw them staring.

“M-Master Wei, you’re awake!” Mo Xuanyu blurted, his eyes wide. Another moment and he was crying, tears falling as he left the nest and pressed himself to the floor.

“I’m sorry!” Mo Xuanyu cried, much to Wei Wuxian’s concern.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Wen Qing quickly said, only for Mo Xuanyu to shake his head.

“This one should have been quicker to retrieve Doctor Liu,” he said, curling his tail around himself. “I tried to stop Master Wei’s bleeding but there was too much and he wouldn’t respond and I—” Mo Xuanyu cut himself off with a shudder. Wen Qing sighed and then pulled him from his bow.

“I told you that what you did helped. He’s awake and responding properly, which means the worst of it has passed,” Wen Qing said but Mo Xuanyu shook his head.

“It’s okay, Xuanyu,” Wei Wuxian tried, keeping his voice calm. “All that matters is that you brought Doctor Liu. You did well,” he added, sitting up and reaching out to ruffle Mo Xuanyu’s hair as he ignored Wen Qing’s hissed *“I told you not to move!”*

The pain from moving was bright, but worth it for the relief that washed over Mo Xuanyu’s face. The teen sniffled and wiped his eyes, letting himself be pet until A-Yuan careened past him.

“Baba!” A-Yuan cried as he launched himself at the bed and crawled onto it. Wei Wuxian quickly pulled the blanket from his back and covered his waist—belatedly realizing he had given Wen Qing and Mo Xuanyu an eyeful—then let A-Yuan climb into his lap.

The sudden weight put pressure on his lower back and Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath, breathing carefully as his son sobbed against his chest. A-Yuan babbled incomprehensively as he cried, hiccupping and digging his hands into Wei Wuxian’s chest, his small nails leaving pinpricks on his skin.

“Aiya, baobei, this baba is alright,” Wei Wuxian gently said, only for A-Yuan to shake his head and cling tighter as Wen Qing scoffed.

“You most certainly are *not*.”

“Master Wei, your *back.*

Wen Qing and Mo Xuanyu spoke at the same time and they blinked in surprise, glancing at one another before Mo Xuanyu flushed and Wen Qing pinched the bridge of her nose.

“But I will be fine, right Qing-jie?” Wei Wuxian pressed and Wen Qing sighed before picking A-Yuan up and settling him in her arms. A-Yuan rubbed his face on Wen Qing’s robes and smeared snot into her shoulder, and Wen Qing waited until A-Yuan had sufficiently cleaned his face before she started rubbing soothing circles around his ears.

“Your baba will be better soon,” she replied as she cleaned A-Yuan’s cheeks with her sleeve. A-Yuan hiccupped, pulling his tail into his lap and looking from Wen Qing to Wei Wuxian and back. He seemed satisfied by whatever he saw, because he hesitantly nodded and Wen Qing relaxed.

The fragile silence wrapped around them, and then Wei Wuxian abruptly realized that he was wearing nothing more than a thin sheet over his lap.

Which meant that Mo Xuanyu could see his back, had seen the whip marks, and *knew that the prince’s husband was damaged goods.*

Wei Wuxian paled, his skin starting to crawl when his eyes caught on A-Yuan’s head, where Wen Qing was rubbing his ears.

His very much *not-human* ears.

Wei Wuxian automatically touched his hair and felt his own fox ears, a slow panic building in his chest when he shifted and his tails pulled on his lower back. *Their features were showing.*

Wei Wuxian scrambled backwards before he could stop himself, his limbs tangling in the blankets as he tumbled from the bed. He barely registered Wen Qing’s and Mo Xuanyu’s panicked shouts over the pain flaring from his tails.

Wen Qing got to him first, pulling him from the blankets until he was kneeling and the pressure lifted from his tails.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, throwing the blanket over his groin before she moved behind him with a snarl. “I’m going to kill you if you tore your stitches,” she added, prodding at Wei Wuxian’s back.

Wei Wuxian squirmed, unable to look away from Mo Xuanyu who was staring in shock as he held A-Yuan.

“I need to hide my features,” Wei Wuxian replied, looking over his shoulder at Wen Qing. He couldn’t tell what she was doing, but his tails laid limp against the floor as she ran her fingers over the thick bandages wrapped around the base of his topmost tails.

“I don’t mind, Master Wei,” Mo Xuanyu hesitantly said and Wei Wuxian whipped his head back around. Mo Xuanyu was staring at the ground, keeping his eyes averted. “But this one will not look if you do not want him to,” Mo Xuanyu said as he absently pet A-Yuan’s tail.

Wei Wuxian’s breath caught at the familiar gesture, his thoughts churning as he pictured *A-Yuan sitting in his sister’s lap, his features showing as she brushed his tail with care as they sat in a pavilion in Lotus Pier.*

Madam Yu wasn’t supposed to return from her trip until the next day.

And then between one moment and the next she was there, static crackling in the air as she yelled until his son was sobbing into Shijie’s arms. Madam Yu had dragged Wei Wuxian away and reminded him of his place in their sect before whipping him until he couldn’t stand.

“Wei Ying, *breathe,”* Wen Qing said and Wei Wuxian shook his head, trying and failing to push himself away. The blanket tangled in his lap and his body felt heavy, sore and overworked and unwilling to move with the weight of his tails dragging him down.

“I need to hide them,” Wei Wuxian repeated, spots dancing in his vision.

“Don’t you *dare—”*

Wei Wuxian didn’t wait for Wen Qing to finish her sentence. He tried hiding his features then gasped, a pained noise spilling from his lips. He panted through the pain, his ears flickering before they vanished.

But his tails were still visible, limp and unresponsive save for the smallest twitch and the burning agony lancing through him.

“I told you not to hide them!” Wen Qing cursed before she moved him to lean against her chest.

“But I can’t…” Wei Wuxian started as he held onto Wen Qing. She rubbed the back of his neck and insisted that it didn’t matter but Mo Xuanyu was *right there.*

“M-Master Wei, I really don’t mind!” Mo Xuanyu insisted as he set A-Yuan down. A-Yuan sniffled and shuffled closer to Mo Xuanyu, hiding behind him as Mo Xuanyu clenched his hands and his tail swished against the floor.

“This one is honored to see your features, even if Master Wei did not intend to show them,” Mo Xuanyu said with a short bow.

Wei Wuxian glanced at Mo Xuanyu and he looked determined; his posture almost perfect as he held Wei Wuxian’s gaze.

They watched one another until Wei Wuxian shivered and let his ears reappear. Wen Qing sighed in relief before she pushed him away and stood, walking over to his closet.

“Good. Now don’t try that again,” she said as she rummaged around and pulled out an outer robe. She returned with the robe then helped Wei Wuxian settle on the bed, letting him sit

upright and covering his waist so A-Yuan could climb onto the bed and into his lap.

Wen Qing helped Wei Wuxian tug the outer robe on, and Wei Wuxian hated that he felt more secure as soon as his back was covered.

Mo Xuanyu made tea while Wei Wuxian was getting situated and then walked over with a fresh cup, handing it to Wei Wuxian with a faint smile. He gave some to A-Yuan and Wen Qing before kneeling beside the bed.

Wei Wuxian stared into his tea, soaking in the warmth until Wen Qing's previous words echoed in his mind and he lifted his head, feeling the blood drain from his face

"Did they take any of my tails?" He asked and Wen Qing pursed her lips, her hands clenching around her tea. Dread trickled through him and he held his breath, praying that whoever had attacked him hadn't succeeded.

"They did not," Wen Qing said and Wei Wuxian exhaled then sipped his tea, chasing away his concern. "But they were close to succeeding," she added, her eyes narrowing.

"They nearly severed your topmost tail," she muttered, rubbing her forehead. "What the *hell* happened?"

Wei Wuxian grimaced and looked away only to see Mo Xuanyu, who looked equally concerned as Wen Qing. Even A-Yuan had nodded at Wen Qing's words and patted Wei Wuxian's chest, insisting that he *"Be good for Qing-jiejie because she's a doctor"*, and Wei Wuxian's resolve quickly crumbled.

"Did something happen while you were cultivating?" Mo Xuanyu prompted and Wei Wuxian winced, brushing a finger over his nose.

"About that…" Wei Wuxian trailed off when Wen Qing slipped a needle into her hand and leaned forward threateningly.

"Tell me you didn't tamper with the wards," she hissed and Wei Wuxian awkwardly laughed, waving a hand.

"Why would I tamper with the wards? I used Lan Wangji's token to visit Caiyi," Wei Wuxian carefully lied and Wen Qing blinked.

"His Highness gave you his token?"

Wei Wuxian nodded.

"And instead of using it during the day and taking a guard with you, you decided to sneak out?"

Wei Wuxian's smile faltered. "When you put it like that Qing-jie—"

"You are an idiot!" Wen Qing fumed as she stood, her hands shaking. Before Wei Wuxian could respond she closed the distance between them, plucked A-Yuan from his lap and

handed him to Mo Xuanyu, then glared at Wei Wuxian.

“Do you know how reckless that was?” She snapped, barreling on. “You are the crown prince’s *husband*, easily recognizable because you’re a war general, and you think that after being traded to the Lan as the last known *huli jing* it’s a good idea *to leave the palace unprotected?”*

Wen Qing spat her final words and Wei Wuxian flinched, unable to meet her gaze. He knew it had been risky to sneak out, but it wasn’t like he hadn’t taken precautions.

Wei Wuxian blinked away frustrated tears, digging his nails into his palms. *He had just wanted to eat good food.*

“I understand,” Wei Wuxian eventually murmured, his voice hollow and Wen Qing paused, caught off-guard. Wei Wuxian glanced at the sunlight coming in from the window then turned toward Mo Xuanyu.

“I’m late for my mornings lessons, aren’t I?” He calmly asked and Mo Xuanyu hesitantly nodded. Wei Wuxian stood from the bed and held his robes closed, waiting for the pain to crest and dull.

“Wei Wuxian, what are you doing?” Wen Qing asked and he gave her a blank look before grabbing a full set of robes from his closet and moving behind a privacy screen.

“Going to my lessons. The Lans can’t know I’m injured or they’ll know I broke the rules,” he explained as he changed, carefully sliding on each layer of robes while trying not to jostle his tails. It didn’t work, and with each small movement Wei Wuxian grit his teeth against the pain.

He heard a scoff and then Wen Qing rounded the privacy screen.

“What you need to do is stay here and rest.”

Wei Wuxian shook his head and smoothed his robes. “And tell them what?” he questioned as he stepped around Wen Qing and walked over to where Mo Xuanyu was holding A-Yuan.

“That you’re sick!” Wen Qing followed him, exasperated.

“Then they’d send me to the healer’s ward, and we both know how well that would turn out.” Wei Wuxian brushed a hand over A-Yuan’s ears and A-Yuan hid his features. Wei Wuxian softly smiled then glanced back at Wen Qing.

She was glaring angrily, her shoulders shaking, but she didn’t correct him. Instead she huffed and stormed over to the low table, pulling some herbs from a qiankun pouch and grinding them into a paste.

“Fine. But at least keep your features visible, because your stiches will tear if you hide your tails.”

“Alright, alright, whatever you say Qing-jie,” he said, lying through his teeth as he herded Mo Xuanyu and A-Yuan towards the door. “A-Yuan shouldn’t be late either. You two should go to the nursery.”

A-Yuan frowned, looking like he wanted to protest. Mo Xuanyu hesitated, glancing at Wen Qing before he stiffly bowed and hurried from the room with A-Yuan in his arms. Wei Wuxian watched them leave then turned and startled when he realized Wen Qing was standing behind him.

“Eat this,” she demanded as she shoved a bowl of bitter-smelling paste into his chest. “It’s for the pain,” she added and Wei Wuxian grimaced. The pain was getting worse however, so he hastily downed the medicine, forcing himself to swallow around the bitter taste.

Wen Qing looked satisfied when he handed her the empty bowl, and when she moved to set the bowl on the table Wei Wuxian quickly hid his features. His ears flickered and vanished, but he stumbled from the pain when he tried hiding his tails.

Wen Qing stalked back over and smacked his shoulder. “I told you not to hide them!”

“But the rules—” he started and Wen Qing vehemently cursed.

“*Fuck* the rules,” Wen Qing hissed. “You could lose a tail if you hide them. If the Lan take issue with it then they can punish me instead.”

Wei Wuxian hesitantly swallowed past the feelings tightening around his throat and turned away. *He couldn’t do that to her.*

“…I promise I’ll let them show,” he allowed and let his ears reappear. He felt Wen Qing’s gaze on his back and he waited for her to respond as he stood in the doorway. She sighed then walked over and turned him around.

“You’re going to hide them as soon as you leave, aren’t you?” she softly asked and he protested, the sound coming out constricted.

Wen Qing furrowed her brow and searched his face. They both knew he’d hide his features the moment he left, and he saw defeat clouding her eyes before she let go of his shoulder.

“I don’t like seeing you hurt,” she whispered and Wei Wuxian froze. “And if you hurt yourself further I’ll knock you out and fetch your husband.”

Wei Wuxian stiffly nodded and stepped away, clearing his throat. “I understand, Qing-jie. I’ll be careful,” he said before fleeing down the hall.

He hid his features as soon as he was sure Wen Qing couldn’t see him.

His ears vanished easily but his tails stubbornly stayed visible. He grit his teeth and tried again, and after a few seconds his tails disappeared. The place where his tails should be throbbed in pain, and Wei Wuxian was suddenly grateful that no one frequented his quarters.

Because it meant no one saw him stumble until he got the pain under control by circulating his spiritual energy.

It didn't make the pain stop, but it dulled it enough that Wei Wuxian straightened as he walked until he looked as calm as he usually did when he exited his quarters. The guards paid him no attention, merely dipping their heads when he passed as they murmured a greeting.

Wei Wuxian greeted them in return then hurried to his lessons, praying his teachers wouldn't punish him for being unreasonably late.

***

Wei Wuxian wasn't what Lan Qiren expected.

His mother had been exuberant when she was a visiting disciple, chaotic and bright and full of life in a way that constantly tested Lan Qiren's patience as she had cackled and trailed after Wei Changze.

Cangse Sanren's tails had swayed when she ran through the halls, features dark as she tumbled and threw their weight around without a care that she was one of the last *huli jings*.

Lan Qiren had spent enough days in the library supervising her daily punishments—much to his brother's amusement—that he had expected her son to behave similarly.

Yet since the day Wei Wuxian had married his nephew, the *huli jing* had been respectful and well-behaved whenever he wasn't falling asleep in his lessons.

There was no chaos nor brightness that echoed his mother's. When Lan Qiren lectured, Wei Wuxian sat calmly and took notes, his eyes rarely straying from his desk.

It was discomforting to watch; and as the days passed Lan Qiren almost wished for the boy to act out instead of sitting hollowly at his desk, demure and quiet and *dropping weight—*

And worrying his nephew.

Wangji had been less distressed during their dinners since he started visiting Wei Wuxian, but they continued to discuss his concerns after every meal, Xichen and Wangji falling into their brotherly communication that Lan Qiren wasn't a part of. Lan Qiren could only watch, the echoes of his brother's relationship threatening to overwhelm him until all he could do was provide the barest modicum of support.

Lan Qiren lifted his gaze as he lectured, his posture perfect while Wei Wuxian took notes at his desk.

Wei Wuxian had arrived late today, insisting that he had been held up at his last lesson and apologizing for his tardiness. Lan Qiren had taken in the dark circles under his eyes and huffed, assigning him a minor punishment and beginning his lesson.

Almost a sichen later and Wei Wuxian was starting to nod off, his head lolling as he wrote. Lan Qiren watched him carefully, continuing to lecture as his eyes drifted to where Wei

Wuxian's features should be.

The Jiang were of the mindset that everyone could do as they pleased and it was frustratingly blasé. It meant that some Jiang tumbled about with their features showing—or worse, in their spiritual forms—while others hid their features with no rhyme or reason to it.

Cangse Sanren used to taunt Wei Cangze about it when they were younger, using Lan Qiren as an example for why Wei Cangze should show his features; even the Lan did it, so why wouldn't he?

Lan Qiren finished reading from a scroll and set it aside, reaching for another when he heard a small *thump*. He looked up to see Wei Wuxian slumped over his desk, his head pillowed on an arm as his brush rolled from his hand and to the floor.

Lan Qiren sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose before he stood and made his way over to Wei Wuxian. *Of all the things to take after his mother, it had to be this.*

Lan Qiren stopped in front of Wei Wuxian, looming in a way that usually woke him. When it didn't work Lan Qiren huffed, sweeping his eyes over him before he stiffened.

He could see Wei Wuxian's fox ears.

They were black and elegant like his mother's *and completely visible.*

His tails were also showing—a multitude of black fur sweeping out from his back. That his features were visible was concerning enough, and then Lan Qiren noticed the sizable pool of blood underneath him.

Lan Qiren knelt and pressed a hand to Wei Wuxian's forehead, and his eyes widened at the heat radiating from his skin. Wei Wuxian was flushed, his breathing shallow and labored, and Lan Qiren eyed the blood on the floor with trepidation.

He couldn't tell where it was coming from, and he quickly tried to wake Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian didn't respond; merely shuddered with a small groan and Lan Qiren had seen enough.

Lan Qiren picked Wei Wuxian up from his desk, hooking a hand under his knees and around his back before tucking Wei Wuxian against his chest.

Blood started coating Lan Qiren's hands as soon as he straightened, hot and wet as it quickly stained his robes. Alarmed, Lan Qiren tightened his grip and swiftly left the room, striding down the halls as fast as he dared.

He was running by the time he reached the healer's wing and his robes were thoroughly soaked in blood.

Wei Wuxian was burning up in his arms, unresponsive as Lan Qiren threw open the doors and succinctly snapped that he needed help.

Several doctors startled upon seeing Wei Wuxian in his arms, their mouths open in shock. Lan Qiren grimaced when they gawked in silence, then gave them his best glare as he called for Doctor Liu.

“I’m coming!” Doctor Liu yelled as she walked in from another room with a bundle of herbs in her arms. “What do you need from—” she started then stopped, her eyes widening when she saw them.

She loudly swore and threw the herbs at an apprentice then crossed the room, calling out orders while the other doctors scrambled to listen. Liu Qing placed a hand against Wei Wuxian’s forehead, cursed again, then ordered Lan Qiren to lay him on an empty bed.

It was mildly concerning that she didn’t question Lan Qiren about what had happened.

Instead, as soon as Lan Qiren laid him down Liu Qing rolled Wei Wuxian onto his stomach, and her orders turned into panicked commands.

Lan Qiren gave the doctors room to work as he moved to stand near the door. He called for a servant and then sent them pale-faced and rushing with a message to inform his nephews what was happening.

A worrying amount of blood covered Liu Qing’s hands, and when Lan Qiren realized they were stripping Wei Wuxian naked he started to look away. Lan Qiren didn’t look away fast enough, however, and he froze when he caught sight of Wei Wuxian’s back.

It was a *mess,* covered in more scars than Lan Qiren could count and with fresh wounds scattered near Wei Wuxian’s tails.

The whip marks alone were alarming.

Although many of them looked old, there were newer ones in various stages of healing—brighter marks standing stark against his skin.

It was with a sickening sense of dread that Lan Qiren realized how frequently Wei Wuxian must have been whipped for the scars to be this visible.

“Uncle?” A familiar voice called and Lan Qiren turned to see Xichen standing in the doorway, his eyes wide with worry. Xichen staggered when he saw him, almost collapsing against the doorway with a horrified expression.

Lan Qiren paused, realized he was still covered in blood, then quickly moved to his nephew’s side.

“It’s not my blood, Xichen,” he said as he met Xichen’s panicked gaze.

“But the servant said…” Xichen trailed off as he glanced over Lan Qiren’s shoulder. Lan Qiren moved to block his view and quickly explained what was happening while Xichen’s brow creased in concern.

“You do not know how he was injured?” Xichen asked and Lan Qiren pursed his lips, almost tugging on his beard before he remembered his hands were covered in blood. He frowned at his hands, debating for a moment whether it’d ruin his robes further to clean them off on them before he sighed and shook his head.

“I do not. Perhaps Wangji might, although if he did I am surprised he did not bring Wei Wuxian—”

Several panicked shouts tore through the room. Lan Qiren turned to see Wei Wuxian struggling to push himself from the bed, ignoring the doctors who were trying to stop him.

Wei Wuxian’s eyes were hazy and his face was twisted in pain. He lifted a hand and buried it in his hair, feeling around until he hit his ears and froze. He looked frightened as he quickly scanned the room, and when he saw Lan Qiren he *flinched.*

The distressed whine Wei Wuxian let out was going to haunt Lan Qiren’s nightmares.

It was panicked and terrified and turned into a sharp keen when Wei Wuxian managed to hide his ears, only for them to reappear seconds later. The thick scent of fear clouded the room and Xichen gripped Lan Qiren’s arm, throwing him a worried look.

Some doctors tried soothing Wei Wuxian, but he recoiled anytime someone came close to him, his ears pressed against his head as he chittered incoherently.

It took Lan Qiren a few moments to realize that Wei Wuxian was *apologizing,* words spilling from his lips in-between ragged breaths.

And then one doctor touched his back—likely to stop him from moving—as Liu Qing yelled a sharp *“Don’t touch him!”* and Wei Wuxian *wailed.*

He jerked away from their hand, curling into himself in a way that made Lan Qiren’s blood run cold.

“I’m trying to hide them,” Wei Wuxian cried as he shuddered against the bed. The doctor that touched him backed away, apologizing repeatedly when Liu Qing glared. Liu Qing shifted and then murmured something to Wei Wuxian, her voice quiet and calm as she gently cupped his face in her hands.

“She is not here, Wei Ying,” Liu Qing said as Wei Wuxian repeated that *“He would be good”* and cried into her hands like a lost hatchling. He didn’t calm when she ran her hands over his hair, and it was then that Lan Qiren realized he was witnessing something that he shouldn’t.

He could only watch as Wei Wuxian kept apologizing for whatever he thought he had done wrong while Liu Qing insisted he was safe and in Gusu Lan.

“Uncle, what do we do?”

Lan Qiren startled when Xichen spoke. He was pale, his expression open and wide with a thin layer of fear that reminded Lan Qiren of when he had told him his mother had passed.

“I do not know if we can do anything,” Lan Qiren hesitantly replied, feeling equally lost in the face of the fear and panic clouding the room. Xichen dug his hands into his robes, and before Lan Qiren could say anything else the sound of hurried steps echoed from the hallway.

And then in a blur of white Wangji appeared in the doorway, his robes mussed and eyes wide.

Chapter End Notes

TBH my favorite headcannon is that LQR is ace and would've been in the best thruple with WWX's parents. Also, just to clarify, WWX is not worried about breaking the Lan rules if he lets his features show, but a different set!

Extras:
LQR: -sends a vague message to his nephews that he's in the healer's ward-
Also LQR: -stands around covered in blood-
Twin jades, when they arrive: Σ(°△°|||) +500 panic points

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for your patience! TuT
>
> I ended up rewriting this chapter three times before it settled into something I was happy with, so I hope you enjoy.
> -flees-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Lan Wangji neared the healer's wing, the scent of blood and fear was overwhelming, cloying and thick in a way he hadn't felt since the war.

He moved as quickly as he dared through the halls, brushing past scattered servants until he rounded the turn to the main entrance and stepped inside.

A wave of sheer chaos greeted him as doctors rushed around, their voices frantic and laced with fear.

Lan Wangji flinched, closing his eyes and backing away before he could stop himself, a rising tide of *wrongwrongwrong* clawing through him.

Someone was screaming.

Their voice was panicked, an achingly distressed sound that grated against Lan Wangji's ears and mixed with the smell of distress flooding the room. The combination was nauseating and Lan Wangji grimaced, a thin whine threatening to spill from his lips.

And then Lan Xichen's familiar scent wrapped around him and gentle hands clasped his wrists.

"Wangji?"

Lan Wangji hesitantly opened his eyes and his brother smiled, his expression strained and thin. Lan Xichen squeezed his wrists and Lan Wangji tried to respond, straining to make sense of the sights and smells while fighting the urge to bury himself in his brother's arms.

"It's alright, didi, take your time," Lan Xichen quietly said, holding Lan Wangji's gaze. Lan Wangji stiffly nodded then recoiled when another distressed wail tore throughout the room.

Lan Xichen grimaced, furrowing his brow as he glanced over his shoulder. Lan Wangji followed his gaze then paled, his eyes catching on his uncle, who stood several steps behind Lan Xichen.

Lan Qiren was covered in blood.

Lan Wangji let out a worried rumble as he stepped around his brother and reached for Lan Qiren, searching for the source of the blood.

He couldn't see where his uncle's robes ended nor where the blood began, and Lan Wangji started to call for a doctor, to insist someone help his uncle because *why wasn't anyone helping—*

"It isn't my blood, Wangji," Lan Qiren firmly said, gesturing to the blood covering his robes. Lan Wangji stilled, thrown, and looked at his brother for confirmation.

"It's true," Lan Xichen assured him, and the burning worry inside Lan Wangji shifted to confusion.

Lan Xichen winced at the question in his eyes.

"Wei Wuxian was—"

A panicked sob cut Lan Xichen off and Lan Wangji followed the sound, dread washing over him when he realized where the noises were coming from.

Wei Wuxian was crying in the middle of the room.

He was lying on his stomach on a bed, naked, covered in blood, and radiating enough distress that the doctors around him kept flinching away.

A few doctors were trying and failing to hold Wei Wuxian still, their bloody hands pressed against his shoulders. Liu Qing knelt in front of him, cradling his face and murmuring something too quiet to hear as she carded a hand through his hair.

Wei Wuxian sobbed whenever someone other than Liu Qing touched him, shaking and distressed and *scared* in a way that made Lan Wangji clench his fists until his nails dug into his palms.

He didn't know what had happened, but *they were* hurting *him.*

Lan Wangji stepped forward, glaring at the doctors surrounding Wei Wuxian and ignoring his brother's calls as a simmering anger grew in his chest.

The temperature in the room dropped and the doctors startled, quickly backing away when they saw Lan Wangji, their eyes wide. Liu Qing didn't move, however, and Lan Wangji let a threatening rumble build in his throat.

Because Wei Wuxian was still crying.

He babbled at Liu Qing incessantly, insisting that he *was trying to hide them and that he was sorry* and Lan Wangji had seen enough.

"Leave," Lan Wangji ordered as he summoned his guqin, and the doctors froze before looking at Liu Qing. Liu Qing hesitated in her ministrations, glancing at Lan Wangji and searching his gaze.

"I'm not leaving," she said, her voice clipped.

Lan Wangji stiffened, opening his mouth to repeat himself when he realized that his husband's features were *visible*.

Lan Wangji immediately looked away, chastising himself. *Wei Wuxian had not given him permission.*

Let alone the doctors surrounding him.

But they hadn't turned their eyes away nor moved to leave. Instead, they stood staring at Lan Wangji with varying expressions of confusion and fear.

"Your crown prince gave you an order," Lan Qiren suddenly said as he stepped forward, his tone brokering no argument. A moment passed and then the doctors jerked into motion, quickly bowing and fleeing the room until only Liu Qing remained.

"You may stay," Lan Wangji allowed, nodding to Liu Qing before he sunk to the floor beside Wei Wuxian's bed, putting his back to Wei Wuxian and settling his guqin on his lap.

Lan Wangji heard Liu Qing shift behind him, whispering softly as she asked Wei Wuxian if she could look at his wounds. Wei Wuxian must have agreed, because he heard Liu Qing let out a relieved sigh amidst the rustling of robes.

Lan Wangji had to force himself not to turn around.

He distracted himself by running his fingers over his guqin, uselessly testing the strings' tension. They were perfectly strung, as expected, and Lan Wangji carefully calmed his breathing, centering himself as he plucked the starting notes of *clarity*.

Lan Wangji's hands steadied as he worked his spiritual energy into the song, letting the familiar lifts and lilts gently pull his energy from the guqin and into the room. It was soothing and calm, and after a few minutes Lan Wangji looked toward the door, his brow creasing when he realized his brother and uncle hadn't left.

Lan Wangji resisted the sudden urge to block Wei Wuxian from their sight.

He knew they meant no harm, but Wei Wuxian was still crying, his features likely still visible, and *they didn't have permission.*

Lan Wangji thumped his tail against the floor, holding his brother's gaze until Lan Xichen's eyes widened and he took a step backwards. Lan Xichen reached for Lan Qiren, his mouth opening before he startled when a servant abruptly darted inside and bowed.

Lan Xichen's open demeanor vanished in an instant as his expression shuttered. Lan Wangji looked away when it happened, listening as the servant stammered that the Jin contingent had

arrived, and his brother's presence was needed to greet them.

Lan Xichen thanked the servant then dismissed them, and Lan Wangji relaxed when his brother and uncle followed the servant out.

Lan Wangji played *clarity* until Wei Wuxian stopped crying. He heard Liu Qing whispering calming words as she worked, and between her soothing scent and *clarity*, the thick scent of distress drained from the room.

Time passed slowly, and Lan Wangji focused on winding his spiritual energy through his notes until Liu Qing stepped into view.

Her robes were splattered with blood—*too much blood*—and she looked exhausted, but she gave him a faint smile as she gestured to his guqin.

“He’s finally asleep and I’ve stabilized him. You can stop now,” she gently said. Lan Wangji acknowledged her with a hum, then continued playing.

Liu Qing sighed and grabbed a bowl of bitter-smelling herbs before kneeling across from him. She began crushing and mixing the herbs into a thick poultice and Lan Wangji breathed carefully, trying to ignore the bitterness permeating the air.

Liu Qing added more herbs, grinding with a single-minded focus until the bitter smell surrounded Lan Wangji and his fingers faltered on the strings. *He couldn’t—*

Liu Qing paused, looking at Lan Wangji with a small frown. She watched him then stood, leaving before returning with something small wrapped in waxed paper.

She held the paper out to Lan Wangji, holding his gaze until he stopped playing and took it.

“Eat it,” she said, then kneeled and resumed mixing the herbs. Lan Wangji hesitantly opened the paper and felt his breath catch.

Inside, there was a small golden candy dusted with sugar.

The last person to give him honey candy had been his mother, and on one rare occasion after she died, his uncle.

His mother had always laughed at his sweet tooth, pinching his cheeks and bubbling with joy until Lan Xichen joined her, their expressions open and bright and uncaring that Lan Wangji pouted as he had stuffed candy into his mouth.

The candies had been sweet and covered the scent of medicine in his mother’s rooms, and he had petulantly held his hand out for more whenever he finished. His mother’s eyes had glowed every time it happened, and she’d pull him to her chest and rumble until he inevitably fell asleep.

A tightness pressed against Lan Wangji’s chest, and he looked from the candy to Liu Qing before carefully setting the candy on his tongue and handing the wrapper back to her.

The candy tasted light and sweet, and it chased away the bitterness crowding the air.

Relieved, Lan Wangji resumed playing *clarity*.

Only after Liu Qing carried the medicine away and reappeared with a basin of water did Lan Wangji speak.

“What happened?”

Liu Qing pursed her lips, cleaning the blood from her hands before she replied.

“Someone tried to steal his tails.”

Lan Wangji managed to keep his hands steady as he reeled, anger and worry mixing into a thick syrup threatening to engulf him.

“Who would—” Lan Wangji began, but Liu Qing quickly lifted a hand.

“No one in the palace, your highness,” she said, which only stoked his growing concern. The guards hadn’t mentioned Wei Wuxian leaving, which meant Wei Wuxian had been desperate enough to sneak out unprotected.

“He didn’t tell me much, but he said he visited Caiyi last night,” Liu Qing explained, frowning as she finished cleaning one hand and started on the other.

“Someone drugged him—likely something he was drinking—then attacked after it took effect. He didn’t mention whether it was one person or a group,” she said, her displeasure evident. “The *idiot.”*

Lan Wangji bristled at her words, his tail thumping lightly.

“Why?” He eventually questioned and Liu Qing’s eyes slowly widened.

“You do not know,” she breathed before her shoulders slumped and she rubbed a hand over her face. “Your highness,” she began, her expression pained. “Surely you’ve heard the rumors about why the Wen were hunting *huli jing*?”

Lan Wangji inclined his head.

“I am aware.”

He had heard of the Wen hunting *huli jings* before the war began. Stories of power and greed and the magic that could be harvested from their tails.

But he had assumed the stories were simply that—a way for the Wen to justify their destruction of spirits that most of the sects feared.

“The rumors are correct,” Liu Qing said and Lan Wangji stiffened, fingering the next few notes of *clarity* too loudly.

“They did not succeed in stealing Wei Wuxian’s tails,” Liu Qing continued, and Lan Wangji slowly breathed away the ice dusting his arms.

“Will he be alright?” Lan Wangji asked, and Liu Qing huffed a small laugh.

“Wei Wuxian might be an idiot, but he’s a resilient one. Provided he actually listens to me for once and *rests*, he will be fine.”

“I will make sure he sufficiently rests,” Lan Wangji replied with a small nod. *He would protect his husband*.

Liu Qing smiled and pushed herself to her feet. “Good luck with that, your highness,” she said, waving a hand in his direction. “Keep an eye on him until I return,” she added before leaving the room.

Lan Wangji continued playing in her absence, turning over what she had said as he listened to Wei Wuxian’s steady breathing.

By the time Liu Qing returned, Lan Wangji had decided what he needed to do. He would need to ask his uncle and brother about his request, but he couldn’t see them taking issue with his solution.

And if the way Lan Xichen’s eyes sparked with mischief anytime Lan Wangji mentioned Wei Wuxian was any indication, his brother would be particularly delighted with his idea.

Liu Qing returned carrying a tray laden with another basin of water, clean cloths, and oil jars. She stepped around Lan Wangji and settled beside him before setting the tray between them on the floor.

Liu Qing dipped a cloth in the water and leaned over the bed, pulling something black into her lap. She brushed a wet cloth over the furry blackness she held, and Lan Wangji flushed and quickly looked away when he realized what she was doing.

Lan Wangji scolded himself for not recognizing the materials in her hands sooner, and steadily ignored how his instincts insisted that he should be the one cleaning his husband’s tails.

“I am not using soap.”

Lan Wangji paused, then looked at Liu Qing from the corner of his eye.

“You can, but it would be a mess without putting him into a bath,” she continued, leaving Lan Wangji thoroughly confused. After a moment Liu Qing paused, turning to look at him properly.

“Dragons do not have fur,” she stated as if that explained everything, then resumed her work. Lan Wangji blinked, turning her words over until warmth bloomed through him, aching and slow like the honey candy lingering on his tongue.

She was teaching him.

“Thank you,” Lan Wangji said, then listened quietly as Liu Qing walked him through the long process of properly cleaning Wei Wuxian’s tails.

Lan Wangji couldn’t see how many tails Wei Wuxian had, but he had repeated *clarity* several times by the time Liu Qing had worked them clean with water, then combed and brushed them with unscented oils.

She cleaned up her materials when she finished then stood, turning to Lan Wangji.

“You haven’t looked at him since you arrived,” she said as she balanced the tray against her waist. Lan Wangji hummed, still playing despite the soreness creeping into his fingers.

“Mn. Wei Wuxian has not yet decided to show me.”

Liu Qing sucked in a breath, shifting on her feet.

“You are…not what I expected,” she softly murmured, and then before Lan Wangji could reply she turned and left again.

Alone with Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji took a moment to stretch his fingers before continuing to play, transitioning into different melodies that soothed in a way *clarity* couldn’t.

A shichen later Liu Qing returned with a servant in tow.

She stopped in front of Lan Wangji, her hands on her hips as she looked him over.

“You should rest, your highness,” she said as she gestured to his guqin. Lan Wangji didn’t stop playing and Liu Qing grimaced, shaking her head as she motioned to the servant. “Wei Wuxian won’t be happy if you injure yourself.”

Lan Wangji paused at that, letting his hands hover over the strings.

“I won’t ask you to leave, but please at least eat something.”

The servant beside her stepped forward and set a small desk by Lan Wangji’s side, laden with food and what looked like the paperwork he usually completed in the evenings.

A quick glance at the windows told him that evening, in fact, had fallen, and he reluctantly moved his guqin from his lap and shifted parallel to Wei Wuxian to face the desk.

The servant bowed then scurried away as Lan Wangji started eating the meal laid before him.

Liu Qing didn’t speak further; merely moved around gathering various herbs and bowls before she stepped into another room, telling him to call her if Wei Wuxian woke.

It was difficult not to look at Wei Wuxian as Lan Wangji ate.

Wei Wuxian’s face was turned toward him, his breathing soft and expression lax from sleep. A few strands of hair fell over his cheeks, moving gently with each breath.

Lan Wangji wanted to brush the hair away but didn't, and instead finished his meal and began his paperwork, setting his concerns aside as he sorted through the day's petitions and reports.

***

It was well into the evening by the time Lan Wangji finished his paperwork, and Wei Wuxian hadn't woken.

Time had slipped by while Lan Wangji worked and the doctors returned. They had shuffled around warily at first, eyeing Lan Wangji until Liu Qing had snapped at them to stop staring.

They hadn't, and Liu Qing had resolutely ordered two apprentices to drag privacy screens around Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian until they were separated from the rest of the room.

Lan Wangji had tried helping them set up the screens, but the apprentices had blushed and bowed, insisting that they could handle it. They had then proceeded to struggle pulling the screens together while Lan Wangji watched in case he needed to step in.

With the screens in place, Lan Wangji focused on his work, only taking short breaks when Liu Qing returned to check on Wei Wuxian and change his bandages. She had reassured him that she didn't expect Wei Wuxian to wake until the following day, before gently suggesting he might take his leave to get some rest.

Lan Wangji had hummed and continued working, ignoring Liu Qing until she left.

Lan Wangji breathed deeply as he finished reviewing the last of his paperwork and sorted everything into neat piles for the servants to collect.

The room had grown dark with the late hour, and Lan Wangji felt the weight of the night press against him. It was well past the time the Lan normally went to sleep, and he circulated his spiritual energy to keep himself from falling asleep.

He had moved his desk to the side and resumed sitting beside Wei Wuxian's bed when he heard a tentative knock on the privacy screen. Lan Wangji lifted his gaze to see Mo Xuanyu standing with Wei Yuan in his arms.

Mo Xuanyu looked tired, dark circles under his eyes and his robes and hair disheveled.

Wei Yuan didn't look much better.

His eyes were red and his cheeks flushed, and he sucked his thumb as he curled into Mo Xuanyu's chest. Every few seconds his eyes drifted shut and his head dropped before he jolted awake and patted his cheeks.

"I told him that A-Yuan could visit Wei Wuxian before going to bed," Liu Qing said as she joined Mo Xuanyu at the front of the privacy screen. Mo Xuanyu startled at her appearance, tightening his hands around Wei Yuan before he hesitantly laughed, his tail curling around his leg.

"He refused to go to sleep," Mo Xuanyu sighed, then set Wei Yuan on the floor.

Wei Yuan held tightly to Mo Xuanyu's robes and looked at Liu Qing, holding her gaze until she motioned him forward. As soon as Wei Yuan moved Liu Qing murmured that she'd let them have some privacy before she vanished with Mo Xuanyu in tow.

Lan Wangji watched Wei Yuan take a few steps toward Wei Wuxian, and when Wei Yuan's eyes started filling with tears he realized he was vastly unprepared.

Another moment and Wei Yuan was fully crying, his cheeks turning red as he pressed himself against the edge of Wei Wuxian's bed. He shook as he cried, periodically wiping snot and tears on his sleeves as he dug his hands into the bed.

Wei Yuan didn't try to climb into bed with Wei Wuxian, and Lan Wangji faintly wondered if it was because Wei Yuan had seen Wei Wuxian injured before.

Which didn't bode well if it was true.

Lan Wangji settled himself then lifted his hands, reaching for Wei Yuan. He stopped before touching Wei Yuan, however, hesitating.

The boy hadn't minded Lan Wangji touching him before, but he hadn't been distressed then. Lan Xichen insisted children liked being held for comfort, but it had often made Lan Wangji's skin crawl when he was a child.

Only his mother and Lan Xichen could touch him when he was upset without it being overwhelming, something his caretakers had learned quickly lest they incite Lan Qiren's ire.

But Wei Yuan was clearly upset; he periodically patted Wei Wuxian's face as his tears stained the bed.

Before Lan Wangji could decide whether or not to console Wei Yuan, Wei Yuan hiccupped and wiped his face clean with a sleeve, then turned to Lan Wangji with wide, watery eyes. He stared at Lan Wangji and sniffled, then slowly shuffled forward while holding his gaze.

Lan Wangji had the distinct impression the child was assessing him.

And then Wei Yuan crawled into his lap.

Lan Wangji stilled, holding his breath, his hands frozen in mid-air. Wei Yuan squirmed around for a few seconds then deflated, burying his face against Lan Wangji's chest and shoving his hands between the top layers of Lan Wangji's robes.

The child felt light against him, and Lan Wangji's hands minutely shook as Wei Yuan continued crying, his sobs turning into small whines as he pressed himself closer.

An answering whine built in Lan Wangji's chest, and then someone let out a fond sigh.

Liu Qing was standing at the opening to the privacy screens, her brow minutely furrowed before the expression smoothed away.

“All you need to do is hold him,” she gently murmured. Lan Wangji nodded then carefully wrapped his arms around Wei Yuan, and he was relieved when Wei Yuan stopped crying.

“May I?,” Liu Qing asked as she stepped toward them, holding out a small blanket. Lan Wangji nodded, then held still as Liu Qing knelt and wrapped the blanket around Wei Yuan. She tucked the edges into Lan Wangji’s belt and Lan Wangji held his breath, bracing himself for her touch.

But her fingers were light, and Liu Qing was stepping away and leaving before Lan Wangji realized she had finished.

Lan Wangji tensed when Wei Yuan burrowed into the blanket, then relaxed when Wei Yuan let out a pleased chirp. The sound was small and broken by a few sniffles, and Wei Yuan chirped again when Lan Wangji tightened his hold.

Maybe he could do this.

They sat in silence as Lan Wangji waited for something to break the tension.

For Wei Yuan to push Lan Wangji away, to crawl off Lan Wangji’s lap and insist to be taken to bed, or for him to leave Lan Wangji for Wei Wuxian.

But Wei Yuan didn’t move, and his scent shifted from distressed to a calm contentedness that left Lan Wangji reeling.

And then, much to Lan Wangji’s surprise, Wei Yuan’s features appeared.

Lan Wangji couldn’t see the boy’s tail, but he felt its sudden presence press against his hands as the boy’s ears unfurled from his head. Lan Wangji adjusted his hold on Wei Yuan, not wanting to put pressure on his tail, when Wei Yuan froze.

The boy pulled back from Lan Wangji’s chest, his eyes wide and panicked as his ears disappeared, only to reappear a few seconds later. Lan Wangji minutely frowned, watching as Wei Yuan started crying again, his ears disappearing and reappearing a few times until the heavy scent of fear reappeared.

“Wei Yuan,” Lan Wangji called and Wei Yuan flinched, sinking into the blanket as he started shaking.

“Wei Yuan?” Lan Wangji repeated, worry swirling through him when Wei Yuan didn’t respond. His features kept disappearing and reappearing, and every time they reappeared Wei Yuan cried harder until he was babbling against Lan Wangji’s chest.

Lan Wangji paled when he realized Wei Yuan was *apologizing* between his sobs.

Lan Wangji felt the temperature around them drop and he immediately reigned in his powers, keeping a tight grip on them as he tried not to panic. He wasn’t good with children, much less crying ones, and he quickly closed his eyes, trying to remember how his mother had calmed him as a child.

Her arms had been warm, when she had held him, *soft and strong and unrelenting as Lan Wangji cried into her robes.*

And most importantly, *her arms had felt safe.*

Lan Wangji tightened his grip on Wei Yuan, then decided it was necessary to break a rule and interrupt the boy's constant apologies.

"I do not mind," Lan Wangji said, his voice firm as he cut off Wei Yuan's babbling.

Wei Yuan shook his head against Lan Wangji's chest, his features still flickering. A flash of anger shot through Lan Wangji, and he grit his teeth against the idea that Wei Yuan thought he *needed* to apologize.

Anger wouldn't help Wei Yuan, however, and Lan Wangji forced himself to let it go. There would be time to investigate later, and to see what Lan Qiren and his brother found out from their inquiries with the Jiang.

"It is forbidden to lie."

Wei Yuan sniffled and pulled back to look at Lan Wangji. Wei Yuan didn't look convinced but stopped crying, and Lan Wangji carefully pretended he didn't see it when Wei Yuan wiped his face on Lan Wangji's robes.

His robes had seen worse during the war, and meant little in the face of Wei Yuan's distress.

"You are a Lan now. It is traditional to show one's features," Lan Wangji explained. Wei Yuan scrunched his nose, looking confused.

"All the time?"

"Yes," Lan Wangji confirmed. "Especially around family."

Wei Yuan frowned, dropping his gaze as he tugged on Lan Wangji's robes and shoved his hands between the layers again. Lan Wangji waited as Wei Yuan fidgeted, sitting quietly until Wei Yuan ducked his head and mumbled into his chest.

"It's really okay?"

"It is."

"…And baba won't get in trouble?" Wei Yuan asked, his voice a whisper.

Lan Wangji paused, his eyes widening as the magnitude of what Wei Yuan asked washed over him.

Because it meant someone had—

No.

Lan Wangji didn't realize he was growling until Wei Yuan burst into tears. A ripple of fear tainted his scent and Lan Wangji immediately stopped growling, mentally assigning himself punishment.

"I am sorry," Lan Wangji said, then pulled Wei Yuan's hands from his eyes and met Wei Yuan's gaze. "I have erred. Your father will not be in trouble, nor will you," he explained.

Wei Yuan hesitated, rubbing his eyes.

"Promise?"

"Mn," Lan Wangji replied, and then Wei Yuan tensed before letting his features show.

Wei Yuan's features were almost the exact opposite of Wei Wuxian's in color, his ears and tail a soft white. Wei Yuan's ears tipped into a pointed shape, and his tail was fluffy and long despite his young age.

And he only had one.

Lan Wangji knew from how long Liu Qing had taken to clean Wei Wuxian's tails that Wei Wuxian had many of them, but he hadn't known whether Wei Wuxian was born with them or had earned them.

That Wei Yuan only had one suggested the latter was true, which meant that his husband was more formidable than he had originally thought.

Wei Yuan's eyes widened in surprise when Lan Wangji didn't react. Lan Wangji hummed and brushed his hand over Wei Yuan's back, rubbing small circles until Wei Yuan melted against him.

And then, much to Lan Wangji's surprise, Wei Yuan started purring.

His purring kept breaking off into small hiccups whenever he breathed, however, and Lan Wangji shifted Wei Yuan closer to his chest, assuming the boy's tiredness was finally starting to show.

Lan Wangji slowly began rumbling, keeping his tone light and soft. Wei Yuan chirped happily when he heard the rumble, and then Lan Wangji watched as Wei Yuan fell asleep.

Wei Yuan's breaths puffed against Lan Wangji's chest, and Lan Wangji realized he wouldn't be able to move without potentially waking Wei Yuan. Surely someone would take him away, but Mo Xuanyu hadn't returned and when he listened for Liu Qing's presence he realized he couldn't hear anyone walking around the room.

Lan Wangji's rumbling stuttered momentarily, and then he carefully moved his concerns aside for later. He hadn't planned on leaving Wei Wuxian's side until he woke, after all, and Wei Wuxian would likely be worried about Wei Yuan if he couldn't see the boy when he woke.

Wei Yuan was also clearly exhausted, and it couldn't hurt to keep him overnight.

Nodding to himself, Lan Wangji waved a hand to douse the candles in the room and let himself drift, circling his spiritual energy as he meditated and waited for Wei Wuxian to wake.

His body knew the hour was late, however, and despite his best efforts he was soon asleep.

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Wei Wuxian felt the dregs of a nightmare slip from his grasp as he startled awake.

The images of Jiang Cheng and Shijie covered in blood and screaming wavered before his eyes and he whined, the sound small and pitiful as he gasped into the night.

Everything was dark, and hot, and *the blood wouldn't leave,* and Wei Wuxian blinked frantically until his vision cleared.

Ah, he was still dreaming.

Because he saw Lan Wangji sitting asleep beside him, poised and regal as his white robes glinted in the moonlight. A-Yuan was curled against Lan Wangji's chest, wrapped in a makeshift nest and burrowed between Lan Wangji's robes.

Huh.

At least A-Yuan looked happy, Wei Wuxian thought before he sunk into the blackness once more.

Chapter End Notes

LWJ is often hard to write, because his feelings are *very* strong and this author easily gets lost in them. Also, everyone give it up for WQ because she took one look at LWJ and went "ah yes, let me teach him how to care for this idiot fox of mine". A true queen.

Extra:
WQ returns the next morning to find LWJ with A-Yuan in his lap. LWJ is doing a happy rumble, tail lightly thumping as A-Yuan draws on spare paper LWJ had leftover from his paperwork.

LWJ's ears turn bright red when he realizes WQ's watching, but he doesn't move, and WQ teases him the rest of the morning about it.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> My prayers to the chapter length gods have gone unanswered, so have this extra-long chapter. Also thank you to everyone leaving kudos and kind comments, they feed my soul. I'm so glad others are enjoying this self-indulgent hot mess. ;w;
>
> Edit: Thank you to those who caught my error with Wen Qing's name. TvT It's since been fixed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wei Wuxian woke to the soft scratching sounds of someone grinding cinnabar.

The noise was quiet, stifled and precise in a way that didn't grate against his ears as he slowly came back to himself.

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes and breathed deeply, fingers twitching as aches skittered throughout his body. His limbs felt heavy and sluggish, and they protested when he lifted his arm.

A wash of white fabric greeted him, and it took him a moment to register that he was wearing an inner robe. The robe was too big, however, and it pooled over his hands and around his waist.

And smelled faintly of sandalwood.

Confused, Wei Wuxian looked around, dimly registering that it looked like he was in the healer's ward before his breath caught when he saw Lan Wangji sitting with his back to him.

Lan Wangji's posture was ramrod straight as he ground cinnabar while kneeling at a small desk. He worked methodically, picking up a brush and dipping it in the new ink, his wrist making minute movements as he started writing.

Wei Wuxian flexed his hand, reaching for Lan Wangji's back. He grabbed Lan Wangji's ribbon and hair then gave them a gentle tug.

Lan Wangji stiffened and Wei Wuxian retracted his hand in surprise, thinking *He was real?* before Lan Wangji abruptly set down his brush, stood, and vanished around the privacy screens.

Wei Wuxian propped himself up on his forearms, confirmed that Lan Wangji had actually disappeared, then collapsed on the bed with a groan.

Lan Wangji returned moments later with Wen Qing in tow. He gave Wei Wuxian an almost imperceptible nod, then resumed kneeling with his back to Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian frowned, watching Lan Wangji until Wen Qing cuffed him on the back of the head.

“I told you that you’d end up here if you didn’t listen,” she said.

Wei Wuxian playfully scoffed, propping himself up again. “You know I’m bad at listening,” he replied, his gaze flickering to Lan Wangji. “But it can’t have been that bad. I’m awake now, aren’t I?”

Wen Qing’s gaze sharpened and Wei Wuxian shivered, sinking away from her piercing look. *Shit.*

“You’ve been asleep for two days,” she explained. “And almost died from blood loss.”

“You did not tell me this.”

Wei Wuxian startled when Lan Wangji spoke. Wen Qing didn’t seem surprised, however, and gave him an unamused look.

“Knowing wouldn’t have changed anything, your highness.”

She held Lan Wangji’s gaze, and something unspoken passed between them before Lan Wangji turned away with a nondistinctive hum.

“That you’re awake means you’re past the worst of it,” Wen Qing continued, addressing Wei Wuxian. “Provided you actually listen to me and rest for the foreseeable future.”

Wei Wuxian winced, chuckling and waving a hand as he reassured Wen Qing he wouldn’t do anything stupid. She didn’t look convinced, but she nodded and began her checkup.

Wei Wuxian held still while Wen Qing poked and prodded and rattled off questions about how much pain he was in. He watched Lan Wangji’s back while he replied, and tensed when he realized Lan Wangji hadn’t looked at him once.

“Why won’t you look at me?” Wei Wuxian asked before he could stop himself. Wen Qing stilled and Lan Wangji stiffened, his fingers flexing around his brush before he carefully set it aside.

When Lan Wangji didn’t respond Wei Wuxian curled his hands into the sheets, clinging as his thoughts spiraled. *He must have finally broken too many rules, if his husband wouldn’t even look at him.*

“Wei Wuxian’s features are showing.”

Wei Wuxian jerked backwards, flattening his ears as dread curled in his stomach. *How hadn’t he noticed?* Now that he was paying attention, he could feel his ears twitching and his tails laying heavily against his legs.

“I’m sorry,” Wei Wuxian said, automatically trying to hide his features. Fear and pain flooded him when he couldn’t, and then he flinched when Wen Qing pinched his cheek, hard.

“Don’t you dare,” she hissed. Wei Wuxian shook his head, pushing himself further away as he willed his tails to move. *He wasn’t allowed to—*

“Wei Wuxian,” Lan Wangji said, his voice calm and clear. “You are not in trouble.”

Wei Wuxian froze, his gaze snapping to Lan Wangji.

“I have not looked because Wei Wuxian has not given me permission.”

Wei Wuxian’s thoughts stalled, clicking over Lan Wangji’s words and their simplicity. Thrown, he glanced at Wen Qing, looking for clarification.

Wen Qing lifted a brow and dismissively waved a hand.

“He’s being polite, you idiot. You can show your features.”

Wei Wuxian frowned, and then Wen Qing sighed, her face softening.

“It’s not against the Lan rules,” she said. “I checked.”

Lan Wangji snapped his head to look at Wen Qing, but she didn’t react. Instead, she held Wei Wuxian’s gaze, her words twisting through him like a slow poison, picking their way under his skin until he was shaking.

It couldn’t be that easy, could it?

Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath, running a hand through his hair and over his ears and shuddering as a fresh wave of panic washed over him.

“They have no plans to tell *her,”* Wen Qing murmured as she gently pulled his hand from his hair before picking up a pile of bandages. “I wouldn’t have let him stay if he wasn’t telling the truth.”

Wei Wuxian bit the inside of his cheek, forcing himself to breathe before he carefully unclenched his hands.

“…You have permission to look,” he eventually said, bracing himself for Lan Wangji’s reaction as Wen Qing unwrapped the bandages around his tails.

Lan Wangji didn’t move at first, only the tip of his tail flicking back and forth, and then he slowly turned around.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure what he had been expecting, but it wasn’t for Lan Wangji’s eyes to widen as his mouth parted and his tail stopped in mid-air.

Lan Wangji’s gaze was intense, the amber of his eyes molten as they bored into Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian awkwardly chuckled, then paused when he noticed Lan Wangji’s ears had turned

red.

Was he blushing?

Wei Wuxian grinned, a rush of warmth sweeping through him.

“Lan-er-gege, are you embarrassed by how good-looking your husband is?” he laughed, his ears perking.

“Mn,” Lan Wangji replied and Wei Wuxian abruptly choked, coughing on his own spit as Wen Qing stifled a laugh.

Lan Wangji looked alarmed and reached for Wei Wuxian, his hands hovering over his shoulders as if he wasn’t sure he was allowed to touch. Wei Wuxian hacked until his eyes watered, and then managed to control himself.

“Aiya, I’m fine, I’m fine,” he insisted, unable to look at Lan Wangji. He hadn’t been prepared for Lan Wangji to agree; it was jarring, to say the least, and an uncomfortable giddiness bubbled inside him until a sharp tug on his tails brought him back to reality.

“You shouldn’t indulge this simple fox when he’s joking,” Wei Wuxian quipped, hurrying to change the conversation. “But more importantly, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be off doing princely things?”

“You were injured,” Lan Wangji replied, as if that explained anything. “I would not leave my husband.”

Wei Wuxian half-heartedly laughed, shaking his head.

“But what about your duties?”

“I brought what was necessary here.” Lan Wangji gestured toward his desk, where a sizeable stack of papers lay. Wei Wuxian swallowed past the growing tightness in his throat, and was mortified when he felt his eyes watering. *No one had ever—*

“He has not left your side since coming here, except for when I forced him to bring you new robes,” Wen Qing said, and the tightness grew until it threatened to overwhelm Wei Wuxian, sticky like fresh *tanghulu* and impossible to swallow.

He shuddered, then made the mistake of meeting Lan Wangji’s gaze. It was sincere despite his overall blank expression and made Wei Wuxian’s skin crawl as he reached for a distraction.

“A-Anyways, Lan Wangji, surely you have some questions,” Wei Wuxian quickly said, cursing himself when Wen Qing chuckled. Lan Wangji looked considerate, however, his brow minutely furrowed.

“How was Wei Wuxian injured?”

Wei Wuxian winced and flicked his ears. He might not be in trouble, *yet,* but there was no good way to say that he had hated the palace's food enough to sneak out at night.

Alone.

"Didn't Qing-jie tell you?" He asked, his grin faltering when Lan Wangji's expression turned dark. "Okay, point taken! But does it matter? I'm perfectly alright, aren't I? There's no need to worry."

"Wei Wuxian."

Lan Wangji and Wen Qing spoke at the same time. Lan Wangji blinked in apparent surprise, his eyes flickering to Wen Qing.

"It matters," Lan Wangji insisted.

"Ah, it really doesn't, your highness," Wei Wuxian replied as he sank against the sheets and pillowed his head against his arms, losing himself in the *tugtugtug* of Wen Qing's hands around his tails. "I'll be alright in a few days and will go back to being the quiet little husband that no one sees."

Wen Qing's hands stilled and Lan Wangji's expression shuttered. Wei Wuxian winced, sinking into the bed and picking at the sheets.

"And I'll give you back your token, so you know I can't run away. You said you were getting me one, but it would probably be better if you didn't."

Wei Wuxian heard Lan Wangji's tail thump loudly, and he looked up in surprise when Lan Wangji let out a distressed rumble.

Lan Wangji had moved closer and was staring at his clenched hands. He shuddered, closing his eyes and breathing deeply before he met Wei Wuxian's gaze and—

Oh.

Wei Wuxian had hurt him.

Lan Wangji looked pale, his lashes fluttering as he curled his tail around his lap in clear distress. Wei Wuxian swallowed in the silence, unable to laugh the tension away.

"Are you unhappy here?" Lan Wangji asked, his voice hollow and resigned. "Is that why you left?"

Wei Wuxian breathed, steadying himself before giving Lan Wangji at least the partial truth.

"I wanted to see Caiyi's night market, that's all." Wei Wuxian forced a smile as he propped his chin on his hand. "I heard it has the best things to see, and it does!" He nodded, then winced when Wen Qing prodded a particularly sore spot.

“And the food!” Wei Wuxian added, his mouth watering. “I didn’t want to bother the guards so late at night, and everything was fine until this last time, I promise.”

“I should’ve noticed when someone drugged me, but it worked out, didn’t it? He didn’t get any of my tails and I’m pretty sure I broke his nose,” Wei Wuxian finished with a laugh. He couldn’t remember much from the fight, but he vaguely recalled hearing a sickening *crunch*.

Lan Wangji still looked concerned, however, and Wei Wuxian brushed his knuckle over his nose and flicked his ears back.

“I’ll make sure to take you with me next time,” Wei Wuxian said, then promptly felt his face warm at his audacity.

“Mark your words,” Lan Wangji hummed, his lips twitching in the faintest hint of a smile. Wei Wuxian flushed when he saw it, his mind going pleasantly blank. “Wei Wuxian will take this husband whenever he wants to leave.”

Wei Wuxian wheezed as his face burned. Unable to respond, he buried his face in the sheets, digging his hands into his hair and whining as he kicked his feet.

Wen Qing abruptly swore and rapped his feet until he stopped moving. She tugged several more times on his bandages then rounded the bed, saying that she needed to get his pain medicine before she left him alone with Lan Wangji.

The *traitor.*

After a few seconds of silence, Wei Wuxian lifted his head.

Lan Wangji was sitting calmly and looked pleased, the tip of his tail flicking back and forth as he watched Wei Wuxian. It was *too much*, but Wei Wuxian couldn’t look away, and they stared at one another until Lan Wangji broke the silence.

“You should not go back to your rooms.”

Wei Wuxian felt the warm feeling drain away as panic took its place. *So he* was *getting kicked out?*

Lan Wangji blinked and sniffed the air, tilting his head.

“You are afraid?” he hesitantly asked. Wei Wuxian quickly shook his head, insisting he was fine. Lan Wangji stared intently before he pursed his lips and looked away, his ears dusted in red.

“I did not intend to…,” Lan Wangji began, trailing off as he pressed his hands into his lap. “I would like for Wei Wuxian to move into the spousal rooms next to mine.”

Wei Wuxian barked a laugh then quickly covered his mouth. Lan Wangji whipped his head back with a stubborn glare.

“I do not jest,” Lan Wangji said coldly. Wei Wuxian snickered, his shoulders shaking as he struggled to breathe.

Because there was no way the crown prince would ask Wei Wuxian to move *closer* to him without it being some sort of joke.

“Giving you separate rooms did not help you settle into the Cloud Recesses, and Shufu and brother have already given their approval.”

Wei Wuxian’s laughter faded when he couldn’t find any mirth or deceit in Lan Wangji’s expression. Instead, Lan Wangji looked upset, a small pout gracing his lips that sent a shiver through Wei Wuxian.

He wasn’t being kicked out.

“What about A-Yuan?” Wei Wuxian asked, his voice unsteady. Lan Wangji curled his tail tighter around his legs, staring at the ground.

“He may stay with you, or in his own rooms.”

“Lan Wangji, that’s—”

“I’m coming in, so you two better be decent,” Wen Qing called as she stepped around the privacy screens with a bowl of bitter-smelling medicine.

Wei Wuxian called a greeting, then scrambled to take the bowl when she thrust it his way.

“Here, drink this,” she said, leaving no room for argument. Wei Wuxian groaned and then downed the bowl quickly, trying not to gag at the bitter taste.

Wen Qing examined the empty bowl, then turned to Lan Wangji.

“If Wei Wuxian moves rooms, no doing anything intimate until he’s fully healed,” Wen Qing calmly said.

“Qing-Jie!”

“Mn.”

Wei Wuxian flushed and threw a look at Lan Wangji, who seemed completely calm despite his agreement. *But why did he agree?* It wasn’t like they had done anything anyways, *let alone anything that he’d need his full strength for—*

A thrill of warmth shot through Wei Wuxian and he ducked his head, tugging on his ears as he tried banishing his thoughts. But Lan Wangji was *right there*, his hair slipping gracefully over his shoulder, horns cresting stoically from his head, and Wei Wuxian faintly wondered how far down the scales dusting his face went.

Wei Wuxian’s breath hitched, and then thankfully Wen Qing interrupted his train of thought.

“Don’t look at him like that, Wei Wuxian. I’m being practical,” she said as she cuffed Wei Wuxian’s ears. “Because if you move closer to the crown prince’s room, I can show him how to change your bandages and you can leave tomorrow morning.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes widened and his ears turned red again. Wei Wuxian watched him, transfixed, before he quickly brushed away the thought of his husband touching his tails.

“Otherwise, you’ll have to stay here until you’re healed,” Wen Qing finished was a satisfied nod.

Wei Wuxian hesitated, looking at Lan Wangji who nodded in return and inclined his head toward Wen Qing.

“…are you sure I won’t bother you, Lan Wangji?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“You will not,” Lan Wangji replied. “Wei Wuxian is not a burden.”

“Ah, okay then,” Wei Wuxian said, his voice wavering as he struggled to process Lan Wangji’s words. “I’ll move to your rooms.”

Lan Wangji nodded as the red on his ears darkened.

“Wait, where’s A-Yuan?” Wei Wuxian suddenly asked with a small frown, realizing that he hadn’t seen A-Yuan since he had passed out. He fiercely hoped that A-Yuan hadn’t seen him being brought to the healer’s ward.

“He is well and at the nursery,” Lan Wangji said. Wei Wuxian let out a relieved sigh, starting to respond when Lan Wangji continued. “And would be better if his father wasn’t injured.”

“Lan Wangji! I didn’t ask to be attacked,” Wei Wuxian huffed, affronted. And then the corners of Lan Wangji’s mouth twitched and Wei Wuxian wailed in disbelief.

“Qing-jie, my husband is bullying me!” he whined as he grabbed Wen Qing’s robes. She *tsked* at him and slapped his hands away, smoothing her robes with a snort.

“Serves you right for putting yourself in danger and refusing to rest. Maybe you’ll actually listen now.”

“Betrayal,” Wei Wuxian hissed, and Wen Qing had the audacity to bow to Lan Wangji before excusing herself.

Wei Wuxian collapsed when she left, stretching his arms with an instinctive groan as he heard Lan Wangji move. Wei Wuxian slowly lifted his head, and was surprised to see Lan Wangji had moved his desk next to Wei Wuxian’s bed.

Lan Wangji quietly rearranged his paperwork, then dipped his brush in ink and resumed writing.

“You may rest while I finish my work.”

Wei Wuxian watched him for several moments, knowing that he wouldn't be able to sleep with Lan Wangji sitting so close. He doubted Lan Wangji would let him move, however, which meant that he had nothing to do until the day ended.

Wei Wuxian valiantly tried pretending to sleep, but after one incense stick's worth of time had passed he gave up, pushing himself onto his forearms as he shifted to the edge of his bed and looked at whatever Lan Wangji was writing.

Wei Wuxian recognized what appeared to be a letter on the trading agreement between GusuLan and YunmengJiang over silks and fabric dyes. Lan Qiren had covered the agreements recently during his lessons, discussing at length the mutually beneficial arrangement that had been in place for over fifty years.

Wei Wuxian had been familiar with the deal before the war, due to the high quality of silk the Lans produced, which went well with the dyes that could only be produced in the fertile lands and waters in the Jiang territories.

"I could help with that," Wei Wuxian offered, faintly surprised when he realized he *wanted* to help.

"Wei Wuxian must rest," Lan Wangji countered, his brush barely pausing. Wei Wuxian sighed, pillowing his head on his arms and watching Lan Wangji.

"But it's boring just laying here doing nothing," Wei Wuxian tried, but Lan Wangji didn't reply.

Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes, determined. "Qing-jie didn't say I couldn't write."

Lan Wangji still didn't respond, and Wei Wuxian loudly lamented that he'd go stir crazy if he had to sit around doing nothing for the rest of the day.

Lan Wangji kept writing, and skillfully avoided Wei Wuxian's hands when he tried taking Lan Wangji's brush. It was *infuriating*, and Wei Wuxian felt a thrill at trying to garner a response.

"Hanguang-jun," Wei Wuxian chirped, shifting closer to the edge of the bed.

"Lan Wangji," he called, but Lan Wangji's expression was frustratingly calm. He continued writing in clean, neat strokes as if nothing was happening.

Wei Wuxian huffed then moved until their arms were touching, and when that did nothing he fished around for the prince's birth name, vaguely recalling that someone had mentioned it before the wedding.

"Lan Zhan!"

Lan Wangji stilled, his hand freezing.

Wei Wuxian held his breath as ink dripped from Lan Wangji's brush onto the paper, ruining whatever Lan Wangji had been working on. Lan Wangji didn't acknowledge it, however,

sitting frozen and silent until a panicked laugh tore from Wei Wuxian's throat.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian called again, and then flinched when Lan Wangji glared.

It was then that Wei Wuxian realized that he might've overstepped.

His breath stuttered and he pulled away from Lan Wangji, flattening his ears. "I'm sorry, your highness, I didn't mean to," he carefully said as he dug his nails into the thin skin on his wrists. "Please forgive this insolent one."

Wei Wuxian waited for Lan Wangji's anger, *flinching from the stinging slap that burned his cheek as he fell to the damp pier. His small hands pressed into the wood as he heaved, choking on his sobs as he promised he wouldn't call Madam Yu by any other name.*

"Do not apologize," Lan Wangji said, startling Wei Wuxian from his thoughts. "You may help," he added, and then shifted to give Wei Wuxian space at his desk before handing him paper and a brush.

Wei Wuxian blinked, staring at the paper and brush for several moments before he gave a watery laugh. Lan Wangji furrowed his brow, looking confused.

Wei Wuxian grinned in response, shoving his thoughts away. "Thank you, your highness."

"Lan Zhan."

"Eh?" Wei Wuxian asked as he settled the paper where he could easily read it. Lan Wangji huffed, his ears pinking as he shuffled a few papers.

"It is no problem if you call me that," he allowed and Wei Wuxian beamed, basking in the sudden warmth.

"Okay, Lan Zhan."

Wei Wuxian muttered while they worked, jotting down notes as he sorted through trade agreements and agricultural reports. Lan Wangji didn't seem to mind his rambling, and he actually answered whenever Wei Wuxian voiced a question.

It was tedious work, but it was more than Wei Wuxian had done since arriving at the palace and it felt *good* to use what he had been learning.

Lost in the work, Wei Wuxian didn't realize how much time had passed until Lan Wangji gently tugged the report he was working on from his fingers. He protested, hurrying to brush a few more strokes before Lan Wangji pulled the brush from his hand.

"Wei Wuxian, it is time for dinner."

"What? It can't be, it's only been a few—" Wei Wuxian started, then stopped when he looked around their secluded space and realized the room was almost dark.

“You’ll have to keep an eye on him when he’s working,” Wen Qing said as she stepped into their space carrying a fresh set of bandages. “He often forgets to eat.”

Wei Wuxian protested and Wen Qing scowled at him. “Don’t look at me like that,” she chided. “You may be brilliant but you’re the biggest idiot when it comes to taking care of yourself.”

Wei Wuxian groaned, lamenting his woes while Lan Wangji cleared the desk. Wen Qing was quick about changing his bandages, and Wei Wuxian barely registered her finishing when the privacy screens shifted and A-Yuan barreled into view.

“Baba!” A-Yuan called. Wei Wuxian propped himself up and pulled A-Yuan into a close hug.

“There you are, my little radish,” Wei Wuxian cooed, breathing in A-Yuan’s clean scent as his son shoved his face into the crook of Wei Wuxian’s neck. Wei Wuxian tightened his hold, letting his son shake against him before he pulled away and brushed a hand over A-Yuan’s head.

A-Yuan’s ears twitched as he playfully protested, and Wei Wuxian jumped when he heard several people laugh. He looked up to see Mo Xuanyu standing near Wen Qing, stifling his laughter as he held onto a tray full of food.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, your highness” Mo Xuanyu said as he set the tray on Lan Wangji’s desk, and Lan Wangji nodded at Mo Xuanyu in thanks.

Mo Xuanyu squeaked, stuttering as he backed away and knelt on the far side of Wei Wuxian while Wen Qing stepped out.

“Don’t scare him away, Lan Zhan, he’s a good boy,” Wei Wuxian said, chuckling at Lan Wangji’s confused look.

“I did not intend to scare you,” Lan Wangji said to Mo Xuanyu, his face serious. Mo Xuanyu gaped then waved his hands, his face turning red.

“W-What? You didn’t, your highness, I promise!” Mo Xuanyu babbled. Lan Wangji stared blankly back and Mo Xuanyu squeaked, covering his face with his hands and pulling his tail into his lap.

Wei Wuxian cackled.

“Baba, be nice!” A-Yuan said, puffing his cheeks.

Wei Wuxian smirked and nipped his son’s hands. “What are you saying? I’m always nice!”

A-Yuan screeched and then hastily crawled into Lan Wangji’s lap, plastering himself to Lan Wangji’s chest and burrowing between the layers of his robes.

Wei Wuxian froze as soon as it happened, his eyes going wide.

For some reason, Lan Wangji didn't seem to mind A-Yuan's presence in his lap. He merely looked at A-Yuan with a hum, his tail thumping before he leaned forward and gently nipped A-Yuan's ears.

"It is polite to ask for permission before crawling on someone," Lan Wangji calmly said.

"Okay, pretty-gege," A-Yuan agreed, then shuffled around until he was facing the food. Wei Wuxian watched the exchange with a shocked expression, then hid a wince when he looked at their dinner.

It looked as tasteless and bland as it always did, despite some of it being for the crown prince. Lan Wangji didn't seem to notice anything wrong, however, and he efficiently served both Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan before serving himself.

Mo Xuanyu scrambled to pour them tea in the meantime, and Wei Wuxian stared at his bowl until his stomach twisted with a thick snarl.

"Baba, just pretend it's spicy," A-Yuan said through a mouthful of food as he leaned over Lan Wangji's lap and patted Wei Wuxian's arm. "It tastes better that way."

Lan Wangji stiffened, then quietly lowered his chopsticks.

"I don't know what he's talking about," Wei Wuxian said, shoving food into his mouth and valiantly swallowing past the way it clumped in his throat. He chased it with a drink of tea.

"The food is not to your liking?"

"Aiya, Lan Zhan, it's perfectly edible!" Wei Wuxian insisted, taking another bite with a smile.

"Lying is forbidden, baba."

Lan Wangji's gaze snapped to A-Yuan, and A-Yuan patted Lan Wangji's lap. "Baba is a bad liar," he added, and the crease between Lan Wangji's brow grew.

"I will fix this," Lan Wangji said before plucking A-Yuan from his lap. He set A-Yuan in front of the desk and then walked out, leaving Wei Wuxian and Mo Xuanyu staring after him with twin looks of surprise.

When it was apparent that Lan Wangji was not returning Wei Wuxian sighed, pushing his food away. A-Yuan hastily finished eating then crawled onto Wei Wuxian's bed.

"Maybe he's not mad?" Wei Wuxian asked as he tugged A-Yuan to his side.

"T-This one will try to find out," Mo Xuanyu stuttered as he quickly cleaned up. Wei Wuxian thanked him, then cuddled A-Yuan close when Mo Xuanyu blew out the candles and left.

In the silence, A-Yuan burrowed against Wei Wuxian until the tips of his ears tickled Wei Wuxian's chin.

Wei Wuxian pressed a kiss into A-Yuan's hair. "I'm sorry if I scared you."

A-Yuan flinched, sniffling in the darkness and Wei Wuxian grimaced, hating the quiet cries of his son.

His tails were still unresponsive, so Wei Wuxian pulled the blankets around them both, enclosing them in a bubble of warmth as he whispered promises that he'd be better soon.

It took a while until A-Yuan stopped crying. Wei Wuxian wiped his eyes clean then slowed his breathing, listening as A-Yuan quickly fell asleep.

And then Wei Wuxian laid there for some time, staring into the darkness as his mind spun.

***

In the morning, Wei Wuxian stirred when Wen Qing arrived to change his bandages.

A-Yuan was still tucked against Wei Wuxian's side, and he didn't stir when Wen Qing brushed a hand over his head.

"He was worried about you," Wen Qing softly said.

Wei Wuxian tightened his arm around A-Yuan. "I wasn't trying to end up here."

Wen Qing scoffed as she handed him a bowl of medicine and unwrapped his bandages.

"Of course not. You just decided to *ignore my warnings* and ended up passing out in front of Lan Qiren," she snapped.

"Very funny, Qing-jie. There's no way I—"

"He carried you here," Wen Qing interrupted with a serious look.

Wei Wuxian spluttered, thick medicine running down his chin. He quickly wiped it away, making sure he hadn't woken A-Yuan before he glared at Wen Qing.

"Lan Qiren doesn't like me, there's no way he would've—"

"If the servants are right, he ran here," she added, much to Wei Wuxian's mortification. He paled, handing her the empty bowl as he tried not to picture Lan Qiren carrying him like a fainting maiden.

Wei Wuxian deflated, and then bemoaned his terrible luck while Wen Qing mercilessly changed his bandages.

By the time she finished, the flaring pain in Wei Wuxian's tails had settled into a dull ache, and Wen Qing was tidying her supplies when someone called a greeting.

"I am sorry I am late," Lan Wangji said as he stepped inside followed by Mo Xuanyu, who was carrying a pile of fabric and waved at Wei Wuxian.

“Lan Zhan, you’re the crown prince. There’s no need to apologize to someone like me.” Wei Wuxian chanced a look at Lan Wangji and winced at his dark expression.

“But anyways, what are you doing here?” Wei Wuxian hurriedly asked. Lan Wangji blinked as his expression cleared and then slightly tipped his head.

“Wei Wuxian is allowed to leave. I will show you to my quarters.”

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian said, having forgotten Lan Wangji’s offer. It was too much, but Wei Wuxian couldn’t think of a way to refuse. Not with Lan Wangji staring at him earnestly as his tail swished against the ground.

“I’ll take young master Wei to the nursery in the meantime,” Mo Xuanyu offered, edging around Lan Wangji as he held out a set of robes. For some reason, Mo Xuanyu didn’t take his eyes off Lan Wangji as he handed Wei Wuxian the robes, scooped A-Yuan into his arms, and then backed away.

Even odder still, Lan Wangji let out a satisfied-sounding rumble once Mo Xuanyu had retreated and excused himself.

Which. *What was that about?*

“Your highness, you plan on taking care of him while he’s with you, correct?” Wen Qing asked, glancing at Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji straightened with a nod, and Wen Qing readily delved into the minutia of what he’d need to do in the upcoming days.

Wei Wuxian lost track of Wen Qing’s instructions once she began detailing how frequently he could take his pain medicine. Lan Wangji looked like he was paying attention, and so Wei Wuxian took the initiative to heave himself into a standing position after he pulled on the robes Mo Xuanyu had handed him.

He grinned when he didn’t immediately collapse.

His legs felt unstable, sure, but he hadn’t fallen over and he started to tell Wen Qing she had nothing to worry about when a sudden pain lanced up his back.

Wei Wuxian broke into a cold sweat and staggered, his tails a sudden deadweight that burned with every movement.

Before he could fall, a pair of callused hands gently gripped his forearms, steadying him as he panted through the pain.

“Wei Wuxian,” Lan Wangji said, his tone worried. Wei Wuxian leaned into Lan Wangji despite himself, breathing carefully until the wave of pain settled into a dull ache.

“Hah, I’m okay,” Wei Wuxian said, but neither Lan Wangji nor Wen Qing looked convinced. Wei Wuxian insisted he was alright as he patted Lan Wangji’s arm, and Lan Wangji looked him over.

“Hn,” Lan Wangji ultimately hummed, deftly settling Wei Wuxian’s hand in the crook of his arm. “This husband will help regardless.”

And then Lan Wangji gently curled his tail underneath Wei Wuxian’s, and the pain radiating from Wei Wuxian’s back vanished.

Wei Wuxian felt his thoughts scatter as he flushed, digging his nails into Lan Wangji’s arm. It wasn’t uncommon that spouses touched one another’s features, *but for Lan Wangji to do it so casually, and in front of someone else—*

Wei Wuxian let out a noise akin to a steaming kettle.

“Does this not relieve the pressure?” Lan Wangji asked, letting his tail drop. Wei Wuxian quickly shook his head when the pain returned.

“I was just surprised!” He strained. “It helps,” he added, and sighed in relief when Lan Wangji shifted his tail back.

“Like I said,” Wen Qing began, abruptly reminding Wei Wuxian that they were not, in fact, alone. “Nothing intimate until he’s healed.”

“Liu Qing!”

“En.”

Wei Wuxian gaped at Lan Wangji, trying to pull his hand from his arm only for Lan Wangji to pull him closer and more firmly wrap his tail around Wei Wuxian’s. It was *mortifying* and Wei Wuxian whined, hitting Lan Wangji’s arm with his free hand.

Lan Wangji—the petulant crown prince that he was—merely blinked at Wei Wuxian, then excused himself to Wen Qing and pulled Wei Wuxian from the healer’s ward.

Wei Wuxian wanted to die from embarrassment when Lan Wangji led him across the palace and to his rooms.

It was bad enough knowing that people had seen Lan Qiren carrying him to the healer’s ward.

It was much worse having to avoid people’s looks as Lan Wangji supported him through the halls.

At least the servants they passed barely looked at them, bowing low and murmuring greetings into the floor. Everyone else stared, women and men whispering behind their fans and sleeves while others deftly hid their glares.

Needless to say, Wei Wuxian was inordinately thankful when they finally reached Lan Wangji’s rooms.

A pair of guards opened the doors to let them inside, and Lan Wangji swiftly guided Wei Wuxian to the room where he’d be staying.

The room was spacious and sparsely decorated compared to his prior one. The bed was simple, but large, and Lan Wangji mentioned that A-Yuan could stay here or in a room nearby.

Lan Wangji then slid open a door and led him into the adjoining room.

This room was slightly bigger but still minimally decorated; a large bed that was properly made sat in one corner, while a desk sat nearby and folding screens blocked off a corner of the room. Pristine stacks of paperwork graced the desk, and the open closet full of pure white and blue robes gave the room's purpose away.

"Of course, Lan Zhan's room would be as neat as he is," Wei Wuxian laughed, still looking around.

"It is proper to be cleanly," Lan Wangji replied, much to Wei Wuxian's amusement. Wei Wuxian grinned, tempted to keep teasing him when he noticed that a full breakfast was spread out on the low table.

An *actual* breakfast.

There was congee topped with scallions and what looked like chicken next to a plate of steamed buns and several small jars. Wei Wuxian could smell the spices from where he stood, and he ignored the flare of pain from his tails as he bounded forward and knelt at the table.

Wei Wuxian opened one of the jars and happily purred as the strong scent of spices made his mouth water. He grabbed a bowl of congee and dumped the jar into it without hesitation, stirring until it turned a bright red.

Wei Wuxian shoved the congee into his mouth and let out a satisfied moan. It wasn't as good as what he could get in Lotus Pier, but the congee was flavorful and warm and full of meat.

Wei Wuxian inhaled the food until his bowl was empty, and only paused when Lan Wangji knelt across from him and passed him a cup of tea.

"Ah, it's really good," Wei Wuxian said, brushing a knuckle over his nose. He knew better than to scarf his food like a starving kit, but Lan Wangji didn't seem to mind. He simply filled another bowl with more congee and meat, then handed it to Wei Wuxian with another jar of spice.

"You may have as much as you want," Lan Wangji said as he served himself a much plainer-looking bowl of congee. "Wei Wuxian is too thin."

"Lan Zhan, you'll spoil me if you say things like that!" Wei Wuxian joked.

"Good," Lan Wangji replied, and Wei Wuxian almost dropped his spoon. Desperate to hide from Lan Wangji's calm look as warmth flooded his cheeks, Wei Wuxian pointed at the pieces of chicken.

"By the way, how did you get meat? Isn't it against the rules?"

Lan Wangji turned his head with a slight huff, his ears dusted in red.

“Did not kill inside the palace walls.”

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian wheezed, slapping a hand against the table. Lan Wangji’s ears turned a darker red and Wei Wuxian collapsed over his food, unable to stop laughing.

“Wei Wuxian?” Lan Wangji called, and Wei Wuxian lifted his head with a grin, wiping the tears from his eyes.

“If you’re going to do things like this, you may as well call me Wei Ying,” Wei Wuxian offered, enjoying it when Lan Wangji’s tail thumped loudly and he glared at it as if it had a mind of its own.

Wei Wuxian cackled as he continued eating, poking and prodding Lan Wangji until the dragon relaxed and resumed eating his own food.

Lan Wangji cleared the table after they finished, and Wei Wuxian sprawled across its surface, stretching his arms and back as he floated in the warmth provided from a good meal and a full belly.

“Wei Ying may rest while I work,” Lan Wangji said, and Wei Wuxian opened his eyes to see Lan Wangji kneeling at his desk and sorting papers. Wei Wuxian pushed himself up with a grin.

“I can help like I did yesterday,” he offered, but Lan Wangji insisted that he needed to rest.

“But sleeping during the day is *boring,*” Wei Wuxian stressed.

Lan Wangji didn’t look amused.

“If Wei Ying can stay awake, I will let him help,” he eventually said, and Wei Wuxian crooned in victory. He shuffled over to Lan Wangji and carefully settled his tails in a way that didn’t hurt. Lan Wangji gave him a look, then handed him a stack of papers.

Wei Wuxian settled in to work as Lan Wangji started writing, determined to show Lan Wangji that he could be useful.

He hadn’t even finished reading the first missive when he fell asleep.

***

Lan Xichen was exhausted.

He listened to the bells ring out the nightly curfew and sighed, rolling the tension from his shoulders as he worked. He had been attending more meetings than usual due to Wangji deciding to stay with his husband while he recovered, but he couldn’t blame his brother for his concern.

Lan Xichen could still hear the echoes of Wei Wuxian's cries, and he carefully steadied himself before he ruined his work.

That Wei Wuxian had moved into Wangji's rooms was a blessing, if his brother's pleased expression during dinner was any indication, and Lan Xichen would manage the extra work until Wangji returned to his regular duties.

Lan Xichen was the emperor, after all; it didn't matter if the paperwork took him hours that he didn't have while the peace meetings devoured the others. *He could handle it.*

Lan Xichen fixed his posture and began opening letters, and his fingers stilled when he recognized Nie Huaisang's familiar writing.

He skimmed the letter, then reread it carefully before he crumpled it and collapsed over his desk, muffling his sudden sobs with a hand.

"…Your majesty?" A familiar voice called and Lan Xichen startled.

Jin Guangyao was standing in the doorway, holding a candle that burned low. The soft light illuminated the worried expression on his face, and Lan Xichen wiped his eyes and pulled on a smile.

"A-Yao, there is no need for pretenses when we're alone," Lan Xichen said, parroting an argument Jin Guangyao refused to budge on. When Jin Guangyao didn't reply Lan Xichen sighed, letting his weariness show.

"It is later than you usually visit. What is wrong?" Lan Xichen asked.

"This one was concerned when your servants mentioned you were still working," Jin Guangyao said as he looked Lan Xichen over. "It appears they were right to be worried."

"I didn't mean to…" Lan Xichen trailed off as he glanced at Nie Huaisang's letter and a fresh wave of despair overwhelmed him.

"Tell me what's wrong. I might be able to help," Jin Guangyao said, stepping closer as he let his features show. Lan Xichen held his breath when he did, watching Jin Guangyao's soft features unravel in the candlelight.

Jin Guangyao knelt behind Lan Xichen and skillfully removed the heavy guan from his hair. Lan Xichen pulled his ribbon over his shoulder while Jin Guangyao worked, letting himself sink into the familiar pull of Jin Guangyao's fingers through his hair.

"I am worried about Da-ge," Lan Xichen eventually said, once Jin Guangyao had moved onto braiding his hair for sleep. Jin Guangyao's hands paused momentarily, and then he finished the braid and moved until Lan Xichen could see him.

"Did something happen?"

"His qi fluctuations have been getting worse," Lan Xichen said, gesturing toward the letter. Jin Guangyao paled, picking up the letter and reading it quickly. He frowned, then gave Lan

Xichen a beseeching look.

“He won’t accept your help?”

“A-Yao, you know how proud Da-ge is.” Lan Xichen clenched his hands, hating that nothing he did seemed to help. He had sent some of their best healers to Nie Mingjue, but despite their efforts nothing had settled his turbulent qi.

Nie Huaisang was worried his brother would qi deviate if nothing else was done.

“What if I played for him?” Jin Guangyao suddenly asked. “I could invite him to come to Jinlintai early for brother’s wedding.”

Lan Xichen hesitated, and Guangyao gently squeezed his hand.

“You said I’ve been doing well in my lessons. Perhaps it will work if I can play for him daily.”

Lan Xichen reluctantly agreed, and made Jin Guangyao promise to send updates once they had started. It wasn’t ideal—Lan Xichen preferred to play for Da-ge—but Jin Guangyao *had* been improving during his lessons.

Knowing there was little else he could do, Lan Xichen grabbed a clean sheet of paper and began writing, taking in the steady warmth from Jin Guangyao at his side as he penned his response late into the night.

Chapter End Notes

I absolutely cannot handle LWJ and A-Yuan's interactions. The fluff is too much.

Anyways have I mentioned that I love wangxian because it means I can write silly interactions? Akjasdhs. (Also I absolutely love LXC and am already sobbing about his arc in this story press f in the chat for this poor author.)

Extra:
LWJ, staring at the lone spice seller in Caiyi and having no idea what WWX likes: What if I bought everything.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Yet again, I had to split this chapter in half. TuT

But I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wei Wuxian woke to the sounds of someone moving around.

A soft creaking from a bed and the shuffling of feet and robes across the floor as Wei Wuxian blearily lifted his head. Somehow he had ended up back in his room, and the pale light of dawn told him it was much too early to be awake.

A steady throb of pain radiated from his tails, and he sighed when he realized the pain would keep him from going back to sleep. He slowly stretched himself out, a rumbling purr escaping him as A-Yuan shifted closer, clinging to his chest underneath the warm blankets.

Wei Wuxian had managed to cocoon A-Yuan and himself in the blankets during the night, and although it wasn't a proper nest, it was comfortable and warm and *he didn't want to move.*

The door connecting his room to Lan Wangji's slid open, and moments later the smell of sandalwood washed over him as Lan Wangji gently touched his shoulder.

"Wei Ying, it is time to wake."

Wei Wuxian grimaced, turning away from Lan Wangji and pulling A-Yuan closer. "It's too early."

He tensed when Lan Wangji didn't respond, then flinched when Lan Wangji started pulling off the blankets.

Lan Wangji immediately froze, his hands clenched in the blankets. *Shit.* Wei Wuxian playfully whined and lifted his head to pout at Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji stared, blinking slowly before he finished removing the blankets. Then like the proper Lan he was, he took the time to fold the blankets and set them near base of the bed.

"Not that I mind, but why are you waking me up? Normally Mo Xuanyu does." Wei Wuxian said, trying not to shiver.

"Wei Ying needs to get ready," Lan Wangji replied. "Shufu and brother will be joining us for breakfast."

“Wait, what?” Wei Wuxian asked, pulling away from A-Yuan and sitting up. “Not that I can refuse to meet them, but I’m sure they have better things to do.”

Lan Wangji made a complicated expression, his tail twitching back and forth. “They wish to see how Wei Ying is doing,” he slowly said, as if weighing each word and waiting for their weight to fall. “It is…important to them.”

Wei Wuxian stared, his mouth hanging open as he realized that Lan Wangji was serious.

Which meant Wei Wuxian would have to share a meal with Lan Qiren and try to pretend that the man hadn’t run across the palace with him in his arms.

A tight feeling wrapped around Wei Wuxian’s throat and he dropped his gaze, nodding at Lan Wangji and trying not to think about the Jiangs. About how stilted diners with Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian had been. Infrequent, but tense and twisted in a way that had made it impossible for Wei Wuxian to do more than pick at his food until Madam Yu mercifully excused him and his siblings.

Wei Wuxian forced a laugh. “Of course, Lan Zhan. I should get ready then.” Wei Wuxian pushed himself to his feet, managing to stand for one moment before gravity asserted itself on his tails and he stumbled, letting out a pained yip.

And then familiar hands wrapped around his waist, holding him steady as a thick tail lifted his own from the floor.

“Wei Ying should be careful,” Lan Wangji said, a furrow between his brow. He looked far too concerned for someone like Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian flushed.

“Aiya, Lan Zhan. This fox is fine,” Wei Wuxian said as he tried moving his tails. All but his topmost tail twitched in response, and Wei Wuxian felt a moment of relief before another wave of pain washed over him.

“Wei Ying is not fine,” Lan Wangji insisted, tightening his hand against Wei Wuxian’s waist as he guided him towards a privacy screen. Wei Wuxian swallowed a protest, a bubbling anxiety cresting in his chest when he realized how secure he felt tucked against Lan Wangji’s side.

Lan Wangji helped Wei Wuxian behind the screen and onto a stool before letting go. The stool kept Wei Wuxian’s tails from pulling on his stiches, and Wei Wuxian pressed his hands into his lap, missing the solid warmth of Lan Wangji’s hand.

Lan Wangji stared silently for several moments before he turned and walked back around the privacy screen. A quick glance showed there weren’t clothes nearby, and Wei Wuxian was about to ask Lan Wangji how he was supposed to change his robes when someone knocked on the door.

“Y-Your highnesses, may I enter?” Mo Xuanyu called.

“You may,” Lan Wangji said. Wei Wuxian listened to Mo Xuanyu enter the room, then braced himself and stood, peering around the privacy screen.

Mo Xuanyu bowed to Lan Wangji, then padded to the bed and scooped a still-sleeping A-Yuan into his arms.

“I’ll make sure he’s ready for breakfast,” Mo Xuanyu said as A-Yuan buried his face against Mo Xuanyu’s neck, purring loud enough for Wei Wuxian to hear. Lan Wangji hummed, his expression fond as he thanked and dismissed Mo Xuanyu.

Wei Wuxian winced when Lan Wangji turned to him with a stern look.

“Return to your seat.”

Wei Wuxian’s ears twitched. He didn’t like Lan Wangji ordering him around, but sweat was beading on his forehead from the pain and he begrudging accepted that Lan Wangji was trying to help.

Wei Wuxian sat and sighed in relief when the pain mellowed into a dull throb. He could manage an ache; it was much easier than trying to stop a flood threatening to consume him whole.

“Are Lan colors preferable to you?”

Lan Wangji was moving around the room, making small noises as he walked back and forth and Wei Wuxian flattened his ears, Lan Wangji’s words ringing around him.

Lying is forbidden.

“…I don’t mind the blues,” Wei Wuxian said, remembering how *Jiang Cheng ran through Lotus Pier, angrily circling Wei Wuxian and shouting "They’re red! Jiejie, why are they red?" as Wei Wuxian stood stiffly in his new robes.*

“But Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian continued, shaking away the memory. “Someone like me could never wear Lan white.” Wei Wuxian laughed, the sound grating and false against his ears.

“Could you imagine? I’d immediately get them dirty and ruin them, and then how would it look to have the crown prince’s husband wearing stained robes?”

The movement across the room abruptly stopped. Wei Wuxian held his breath and waited for Lan Wangji's reply. The silence stretched, and Wei Wuxian debated standing when Lan Wangji stepped around the privacy screen with his arms full of robes.

“Wei Ying would not ruin our robes,” Lan Wangji said, his tail brushing against the ground. “Protective talismans keep them clean.” Lan Wangji stepped forward, holding Wei Wuxian’s gaze until Wei Wuxian buckled under the sincerity in Lan Wangji’s eyes.

Wei Wuxian shuddered, then belatedly noticed Lan Wangji was carrying a set of red and blue robes.

Wei Wuxian reached for the robes, pulling the familiar red inner robes into his arms. It left Lan Wangji holding a light blue outer robe, and Wei Wuxian stiffened when he realized why the robe looked vaguely familiar.

“Lan Zhan, I can explain.”

“Wei Ying need not explain,” Lan Wangji said, closing the space between them and handing Wei Wuxian the light blue robe. “I do not mind if he wears my robes.”

Wei Wuxian felt heat coloring his face and he chuckled, flicking back his ears. “I didn’t mean to steal them! This one had few options after our wedding night.” Which made Wei Wuxian’s lack of options sound like it had been Lan Wangji’s fault. Wei Wuxian winced, then started taking back his accusation when Lan Wangji hummed.

“The servants should have brought your things. It will not happen again,” Lan Wangji said, then vanished around the privacy screen with another reminder for Wei Wuxian to change.

Wei Wuxian stared after Lan Wangji, faintly wondering how his husband continued to surprise him whenever they talked. He had thought Lan Wangji didn’t care, but the dragon had been gentle and soft since Wei Wuxian had woken in the healer’s ward.

Attentive and concerned in a way Wei Wuxian hadn’t dared hope for, not to mention how A-Yuan had taken to him as quickly as he had taken to Wei Wuxian when he had brought him back to Lotus Pier.

Overwhelmed, Wei Wuxian wheezed and buried his face in the robes.

They smelled of sandalwood.

Strongly enough that it suggested Lan Wangji had scented them, which was enough to send Wei Wuxian over the edge. He chittered until the nerves crawling under his skin settled into something bearable.

Wei Wuxian eventually lifted his head, breathing deeply before he pulled off his sleeping robes and let them fall to the floor. He then began the slow process of pulling on the red inner robes and the light blue outer robes, moving carefully to make sure nothing snagged on his tails.

The Lan robes laid comfortably against his usual inner robes, and Wei Wuxian tried not thinking too hard about how the outer robes marked him undeniably as a Lan.

Fully clothed, Wei Wuxian gingerly stood and leaned against the privacy screen as he carried his red ribbon in his hand. He couldn’t hold himself up and put his ribbon on at the same time, and so he rounded the privacy screen and called for Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji looked concerned, and he quickly walked over and handed Wei Wuxian a bowl of thick medicine.

Wei Wuxian downed the medicine quickly, then set it aside and let Lan Wangji brace him while he quickly tied up his hair with his ribbon. The pain started to dull by the time Wei

Wuxian secured his hair, and he grinned at Lan Wangji as he stepped from his arms.

“Thanks Lan Zhan.”

Lan Wangji blinked; his hands still raised as the faintest pink dusted his ears. Wei Wuxian’s ears perked and he playfully chirped, leaning toward Lan Wangji.

“What, do you like how this husband looks wearing your colors?”

“Mn.”

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian said, his face flaming as he stumbled backwards. “You can’t just agree with me like that!”

“I can,” Lan Wangji replied, tail flicking back and forth. “It is the truth.”

Wei Wuxian opened and closed his mouth, trying to piece together that *his husband liked how he was dressed* and utterly failing to compose himself. Desperate, Wei Wuxian waved a hand.

“Then at least warn me before you do something like that. This one can’t take it!”

Lan Wangji slowly blinked, then closed the distance between them. He held Wei Wuxian’s gaze and lifted a hand, brushing the collar of Wei Wuxian’s outer robes into place. “Mn. I will warn you.”

Wei Wuxian hesitated because *what was he supposed to do with that?* and then jumped when a soft voice called from the other room.

“Wangji? Wei Wuxian?”

Lan Wangji turned at the sound of his brother’s voice, and Wei Wuxian shoved the jitters making his tails twitch aside, deciding that it was future Wei Wuxian’s problem. Once he wasn’t surrounded by Lans he could sit down and try to figure out why Lan Wangji was treating him so well, because as it was *it didn’t make sense.*

And then Lan Wangji walked toward the door connecting their rooms and Wei Wuxian panicked, lurching forward and grabbing his sleeve. Lan Wangji paused, looking at Wei Wuxian until Wei Wuxian let go as if his hand was burned.

“Ah, sorry Lan Zhan.”

“What is wrong?”

Wei Wuxian fidgeted, unsure how to explain his growing dread at facing Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen. Because they had last seen him covered in blood and wailing like a frightened kit, if Wen Qing was to be believed.

Which meant that if they hadn’t hated him before, they surely did now.

“There is no need to worry,” Lan Wangji said, stopping Wei Wuxian’s thoughts from spiraling. “Shufu and brother are family.”

Wei Wuxian hesitantly nodded, then followed Lan Wangji until they knelt at the low table in his room, sitting across from Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen. Wei Wuxian’s eyes flickered from a smiling Lan Xichen to Lan Qiren’s unreadable expression before he clenched his hands and tried sitting as still as possible.

Lan Qiren couldn’t reprimand him if he wasn’t moving.

The silence stretched thick and heavy as they waited for Mo Xuanyu to return with breakfast and A-Yuan. Someone had at least brought a tea set, and after sitting awkwardly while Lan Wangji stared at his brother and Lan Qiren stroked his beard, Wei Wuxian began preparing tea.

Madam Yu had beat the steps into Wei Wuxian enough that his hands didn’t shake as he brewed then poured everyone tea, serving himself last. Lan Qiren accepted the tea with a small huff, whereas Lan Xichen smiled warmly and thanked him. Wei Wuxian dipped his head in response, biting back the urge to hide his features.

“Wei Ying, what is—” Lan Wangji started, then stopped when the thud of small feet echoed from the hall and A-Yuan burst into the room.

A-Yuan froze as soon as he entered, almost toppling over when he came to a halt and his small hands splayed outwards in a bid for balance. Wei Wuxian coughed a laugh into a sleeve, mirth in his eyes as A-Yuan looked around the table.

The Lans had turned toward A-Yuan when he had entered, and Lan Qiren raised a brow when A-Yuan continued staring. A-Yuan scrunched his face, looking extremely confused as his ears twitched.

“What’s wrong, A-Yuan?” Wei Wuxian asked, taking pity on his son as he silently willed him to greet the Lans properly. Lan Wangji might not mind a missed greeting, but Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen might expect more and Wei Wuxian didn’t want his son punished for lacking manners. *He had been punished enough.*

A-Yuan didn’t respond, then walked over to Lan Wangji and stared into his face. He was almost eye level with Lan Wangji kneeling at the table, and A-Yuan leaned closer as Lan Wangji watched with a blank expression.

And then A-Yuan shoved his hands onto Lan Wangji’s face with a small *smack.*

Wei Wuxian watched in disbelief as Lan Wangji didn’t so much as flinch. A moment later it registered that his son had *slapped the crown prince* and Wei Wuxian paled, lurching forward to pull A-Yuan into the safety of his arms.

A-Yuan had already stepped away from Lan Wangji, however, and Wei Wuxian watched with growing dread as A-Yuan walked up to Lan Xichen *and then smacked the emperor in the face.*

Wei Wuxian let out a pained sound, missing Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren's twin expressions of amused confusion. Lan Xichen blinked in surprise, not pulling away from A-Yuan as the softest laugh spilled from his lips and his mouth curved into a smile.

"Good morning to you as well, Wei Yuan," Lan Xichen said and A-Yuan pulled away, his nose scrunched with clear displeasure.

"You're not baba's," A-Yuan asserted, darting a look back at Lan Wangji.

And then with a put-upon huff, A-Yuan climbed over Lan Wangji's lap until he was sitting between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian, his legs pressed against their own. Settled, A-Yuan nodded to himself and patted Lan Wangji's leg, reassuring him that he was the 'better' one.

Wei Wuxian was laughing before he could stop himself, an overwhelming full-body laugh that had him shaking into his hands and covering his face. He wheezed, trying to get ahold of himself—he was probably breaking several rules—and looked up to see the Lans looking thoroughly confused. He quickly lost any grip he had on his composure.

Lan Xichen tilted his head and then straightened, his mouth opening softly before he smiled at A-Yuan. Lan Wangji, in contrast, still looked entirely confused, and the furrow between his brows sent Wei Wuxian spinning, laughter bubbling up until he was leaning into Lan Wangji's shoulder, smushing a protesting A-Yuan between them while Lan Qiren let out a weary sigh.

A-Yuan flailed at being smushed and Wei Wuxian pressed against Lan Wangji more, his hands digging into Lan Wangji's robes.

"I do not understand," Lan Wangji stated as he looked from Wei Wuxian to his brother, sounding lost in a way that had no permission to be as adorable as it was.

Lan Xichen covered his smile with a sleeve, delight lighting up his eyes while Lan Qiren sipped his tea with a minute grimace.

"Wei Yuan, we look alike because Wangji is my younger brother. Which means you may call me bobo," Lan Xichen explained, amused. Wei Wuxian's laughter settled into a fond smile as Lan Wangji's brow smoothed.

Lan Wangji nodded the same time A-Yuan did and Wei Wuxian grinned, wishing he could move his tails enough to wrap them around A-Yuan and bury his son in warmth. Instead, Wei Wuxian playfully nipped A-Yuan's ears—much to his protest—then smoothed them back.

"Alright," A-Yuan eventually agreed, glancing at Lan Xichen. "But baba only needs one."

Lan Qiren sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as Lan Xichen folded his hands around his teacup with a soft laugh.

"I do not plan on being his," Lan Xichen said, leaning forward with a mischievous look. "This one already has something like that of his own."

"Brother?"

“Xichen what do you—”

Lan Wangji and Lan Qiren spoke at the same time, the former with a look of curiosity and the latter with concern, and then Mo Xuanyu knocked on the door, entering the room bearing a tray full of food.

Mo Xuanyu greeted them, then seemed to realize he had interrupted something and flushed, turning a deep red and stammering apologies until Lan Xichen insisted everything was alright. Mo Xuanyu hastily placed the food around the table then fled, carrying the tray away and wishing them well.

It wasn’t surprising that the food looked bland; Wei Wuxian knew that the meal Lan Wangji had brought the day before had been an exception. He still wasn’t sure why Lan Wangji had given him spices and meat, but he knew it likely wouldn’t happen again.

And so he readily filled A-Yuan’s bowl before turning to fill his own.

Lan Wangji picked up Wei Wuxian’s bowl before he could, however, and filled it to the brim before handing it back.

“Here,” Lan Wangji murmured, holding Wei Wuxian’s gaze. Wei Wuxian blushed and took the bowl, not having expected Lan Wangji to do it for him in a way that spoke of a simple ease. Like he had done it many times before, when Wei Wuxian knew he hadn’t.

Wei Wuxian thanked him, then tried looking like he wasn’t dreading eating the food. He could complain and pick at his food during his meals with A-Yuan, but he didn’t dare try the same in front of Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen.

Before he could take a bite, however, Lan Wangji pulled a spice jar from his sleeves and set it near Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian stared as Lan Wangji started eating and acted as if he hadn’t handed him something forbidden. To be fair, Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure the spices themselves were forbidden, but the rules around food were many and the palace had no spices in their kitchens for a reason.

Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen gave the jar a confused glance, looking from it to Lan Wangji before they began eating themselves. A-Yuan nudged the jar closer to Wei Wuxian then tucked into his own bowl, which left Wei Wuxian surrounded by quiet Lans and the noise of moving chopsticks.

His mouth watered at the thought of the spice, but he didn’t reach for it. Instead, he carefully started eating and held back a shudder as its bland taste flooded his mouth.

Before he could take another bite, Lan Wangji pulled Wei Wuxian’s bowl away. Wei Wuxian frowned, reaching for his bowl only to have Lan Wangji move it further out of reach.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked, breaking the silence.

Lan Wangji didn't respond, merely held Wei Wuxian's gaze before he opened the spice jar and added a spoonful to Wei Wuxian's food.

Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen paused in their eating, joining Wei Wuxian as they watched Lan Wangji stare at the bowl for several seconds. Lan Wangji slowly added another spoonful of spice then looked at Wei Wuxian, his expression earnest.

Wei Wuxian smiled, ears perking as Lan Wangji frowned and looked back at the bowl, adding another spoonful and repeating the cycle until Wei Wuxian was grinning with delight. Only then did Lan Wangji nod to himself and hand Wei Wuxian a bowl thoroughly doused in spice.

Ah, he had married a kind man, Wei Wuxian thought, then filled his mouth with food as tears pricked his eyes. "Thank you," he said, and delighted in Lan Wangji's pleased hum.

"It appears we did not consider that our food may not be to your liking," Lan Xichen said as he set down his chopsticks, a crease between his brow. "I apologize. We know that those from Yunmeng have more…distinct palettes."

"Do not apologize," Lan Qiren said, his fingers tight around his chopsticks and bowl. "Students from every sect eat our food during the lectures without issue. A spouse of the royal family would be expected to do the same."

Wei Wuxian's tails twitched as he swallowed the bile rising in his throat. He set aside his food and folded his hands in his lap, digging his nails into the skin of his wrists. *Of course.*

"No."

Wei Wuxian jerked his head toward Lan Wangji, eyes wide with surprise. Lan Wangji had set down his chopsticks and was staring at Lan Qiren, his expression blank.

"Lan Zhan, it's really not a problem," Wei Wuxian insisted, not wanting Lan Wangji to get in trouble for his sake. "I don't mind."

Lan Qiren hummed in approval and sipped his tea. Lan Wangji pursed his lips, a flash of anger dancing through his eyes before he curled his thick tail around Wei Wuxian.

"No," Lan Wangji repeated, the tip of his tail tickling Wei Wuxian's knees. Wei Wuxian sunk into himself when Lan Qiren froze, tea halfway to his mouth before he set it down with a resounding *clink.*

"Wangji," Lan Qiren said, clear disapproval in his tone.

"It has made Wei Ying unwell," Lan Wangji replied and Wei Wuxian flinched, his ears flicking back as he stopped a denial from spilling from his lips. Lan Qiren stiffened, then looked Wei Wuxian over with a frown.

"Shufu, it is not unheard of for allowances to be made for spouses marrying into our sect," Lan Xichen gently said. "Especially when their wellbeing is of concern."

“His mother had no issue when she was here,” Lan Qiren said, almost as if he was speaking to himself before he shook his head and let out a sigh. “But I suppose you may be right, Wangji. He’s too thin as it currently stands, and he may benefit from more familiar fare.”

“However,” Lan Qiren continued, “I expect you to manage any changes, as our cooks are unfamiliar with the types of food he would prefer.”

“Mn,” Lan Wangji agreed before Wei Wuxian could protest. “Anything for Wei Ying.”

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian said, darting a worried look at Lan Qiren as his thoughts tripped over *hismotherhismotherhismother*. “You can’t just say those types of things,” he insisted, warmth blooming in his cheeks. *And especially not in front of his family.* Wei Wuxian’s flush darkened when he caught Lan Xichen smiling brightly from the corner of his eye.

“En. I can,” Lan Wangji said without pause. “It is my duty to care for my husband,” he added, and Wei Wuxian couldn’t stop the broken noise that spilled from his lips. He buried his face in his hands, his breathing shaky. *He couldn’t—*

“Wangji is very determined once he sets his mind to something,” Lan Xichen said. Wei Wuxian peered at him from behind his hands. Lan Xichen was smiling brightly, looking thoroughly amused with the entire conversation.

“I highly recommend letting him do as he wants,” Lan Xichen added, his smile curving his eyes into crescents until Wei Wuxian slowly realized that the *emperor was teasing him.*

It was more than Wei Wuxian could handle, and he was relieved when Lan Qiren cleared his throat and encouraged them to finish their meal.

By the time their bowls were empty and Wei Wuxian’s stomach was pleasantly warm, Mo Xuanyu had returned to collect A-Yuan and take him to the nursery. A-Yuan practically bounced around Mo Xuanyu as they left, and then Lan Qiren excused himself and slipped out behind them.

Lan Xichen finished his tea in the resulting silence then stood, smoothing his robes in a fluid motion. Wei Wuxian hurried to stand as well, and swayed as a rush of pin-pricks flooded his legs. Then Lan Wangji tucked his hand into his arm, keeping him steady as he wrapped his tail under Wei Wuxian’s.

Lan Xichen looked at the placement of Lan Wangji’s arm and tail with a pleased smile before he smoothed his expression and met Wei Wuxian’s gaze.

“May I ask how you’ve been fairing?” He asked as he tucked his hands into his long sleeves. “It was…distressing to see you unwell in the healer’s quarters.”

Wei Wuxian awkwardly laughed, looking away. “I’ve been much worse before. No need to be concerned.”

Lan Wangji huffed, tightening his tail around Wei Wuxian and pulling him closer. Lan Xichen pursed his lips and sighed, closing his eyes before he straightened with a pained

smile.

“I’m an elder brother like yourself. Surely you understand how saying such things isn’t reassuring,” he said, gaze flickering to Lan Wangji. “But I trust Wangji to ask for help when needed.”

Lan Wangji nodded, and Lan Xichen’s smile turned genuine. They exchanged small bows before Lan Xichen left and Wei Wuxian watched him go, trying to wrap his head around Lan Xichen’s apparent concern.

It wasn’t unwelcome but it was odd, and Wei Wuxian turned it around in his mind like a piece of sticky candy until Lan Wangji pulled him across the room to a desk laid out with the day’s paperwork.

***

Wei Wuxian didn’t have to cajole Lan Wangji to let him help this time; Lan Wangji simply made space at his desk for Wei Wuxian and settled him there before kneeling beside him.

Lan Wangji sorted the paperwork and handed a thick stack to Wei Wuxian along with cinnabar and a brush with little fanfare. The papers were about ongoing trade routes with other sects, and although it wasn’t necessarily exciting, Wei Wuxian quickly found himself invested in the work. Especially when he realized that several smaller sects were trying to request changes that would unfairly benefit them at the Lan’s expense.

It was satisfying rejecting each one, and as Wei Wuxian relaxed he started chittering, making small comments and talking to himself. Wei Wuxian had stiffened the first time it had happened, holding his breath as he waited for a reprimand.

Lan Wangji hadn’t reacted however. Hadn’t done more than pause and give Wei Wuxian a look and a small hum until Wei Wuxian continued talking. Lan Wangji had nodded and resumed writing, and Wei Wuxian let himself chatter inanely as he criticized each proposal.

Wei Wuxian hadn’t realized how much time had passed until Lan Wangji set his brush down and cleared the papers from his part of the desk. Wei Wuxian blinked, looking at Lan Wangji with his brush poised over another politely-worded dismissal.

“You may finish,” Lan Wangji said as he stood. “I will return.”

He left before Wei Wuxian could ask where he was going.

A flicker of doubt curled in Wei Wuxian’s chest, whispering that *he had done something wrong* before he picked at the doubt and shoved it away. He carefully straightened the missives he had finished responding to and with a jolt realized there were more rejections than acceptances.

Do not overstep where you are not needed.

Madam Yu’s words slipped through him, murky and dark. A sharp tongue whenever he had suggested changes to the youngest shidi’s training routine or spoke out during sect

discussions. A clear reminder that he was welcome only as long as she allowed, and that she wouldn't hesitate to get rid of him.

Which she had, in the end.

"Wei Ying?"

Wei Wuxian startled, heart rabbiting as he turned to see Lan Wangji standing in the doorway carrying a tray full of tea and snacks. Lan Wangji looked concerned, a small furrow between his brows as he walked over and set the tray on the desk.

"What is wrong?" He asked, and Wei Wuxian panicked.

"Why would anything be wrong?" Wei Wuxian laughed, clearing away the rest of the paperwork. He quickly picked up the tea and served Lan Wangji, forcing his hands steady as he avoided Lan Wangji's gaze.

"…If you are sure," Lan Wangji eventually said, then lifted several plates of food from the tray. Lan Wangji paused and Wei Wuxian glanced at him, his ears perking.

Lan Wangji looked confused; his mouth pursed in clear disapproval as he stared at the plates. One was full of ripe loquats while the other held fried lotus root, and neither seemed out of place for a midday snack. Lan Wangji glanced at Wei Wuxian then set the plate of lotus root near him with a nod.

Wei Wuxian was about to thank him when Lan Wangji frowned and added the loquats, then picked up yet another plate—this one with two buns that smelled of red bean paste—and set it near the others. Only then did Lan Wangji's expression smooth, and he learned back with a distinctly pleased look.

"Is this all for me?" Wei Wuxian asked as enticing smells flooded his nose.

"Mn," Lan Wangji replied. Delighted, Wei Wuxian dove into the snacks, relishing in the bright bursts of flavor over his tongue as he chased away the hunger he hadn't realized had been clawing at his stomach.

He had devoured the lotus root and had started in on the buns when he realized Lan Wangji hadn't touched the food. Wei Wuxian paused after taking a bite of a bun, the paste thick and warm. Lan Wangji was watching him with a serene expression as his tail flicked back and forth.

"Lan Zhan, you should have some," Wei Wuxian said as he gestured to the remaining bun. Lan Wangji shook his head and moved it closer to Wei Wuxian. "Then at least have some loquats," Wei Wuxian insisted, slightly uneasy that he was the only one eating.

Lan Wangji considered the offer then picked up a loquat, proceeding to meticulously peel it before he bit into the flesh. The motion was practiced and precise, and Wei Wuxian marveled that Lan Wangji managed to not get any juice on his fingers.

It took Wei Wuxian several seconds to realize he was staring and then he chuckled, shoving the rest of his bun into his mouth to distract himself from the heat filling his face.

And then his traitorous mind pictured what Lan Wangji might look like eating a bun; whether he would manage to eat it primly as the loquat or if it'd make a mess, *sticky paste turning his lips dark red—*

Wei Wuxian choked on the last of his bun, wheezing before he downed his tea until he could breathe.

"Wei Ying?"

"I'm fine!" Wei Wuxian insisted, cheeks burning. Lan Wangji didn't look convinced, but he nodded and finished off the loquats without saying anything. Wei Wuxian carefully shoved his thoughts into a corner to deal with later as they finished their meal.

Surprisingly, once they had resumed their paperwork Lan Wangji began asking Wei Wuxian questions. His voice was gentle and quiet, and Wei Wuxian startled the first time it happened, his head snapping toward Lan Wangji. Ink dripped from Wei Wuxian's brush and onto the desk, and he automatically went to clean it with his sleeve before a hand caught his wrist.

"It will stain," Lan Wangji said, then released Wei Wuxian's wrist before pulling out a cloth to wipe the spilled ink. "If you do not wish to discuss your lessons, I will not ask."

Wei Wuxian's ears twitched and he put down his brush. "It's not a problem. You surprised me."

Lan Wangji blinked, holding Wei Wuxian's gaze.

"Don't look at me like that Lan Zhan! What can I say about my lessons? Well, I'm not the best at guqin, but I'll figure it out sooner or later," he said as he brushed a knuckle over his nose.

"…Would Wei Ying prefer a different instrument?"

Wei Wuxian stilled; eyes wide. Lan Wangji held his gaze, waiting for Wei Wuxian to respond as if he hadn't suggested changing lessons could be easy as asking for something different. Wei Wuxian opened his mouth and then spluttered, and felt the fur on his tails rise.

"As your spouse I should know the guqin."

Lan Wangji frowned. "Spouses born outside the sect are not required to play the guqin," Lan Wangji said. "It is only recommended."

"But…" Wei Wuxian began then bit his tongue, a suggestion dying on his lips.

"Knowing an instrument aids in night-hunting and cultivation between partners. Which instrument does not matter. Wei Ying may play whatever he prefers," Lan Wangji explained.

“I’ve always wanted to learn the dizi,” Wei Wuxian said before he could stop himself. He tensed, waiting for the refusal, the retort of *why would we waste money on such a thing?* but all Lan Wangji did was nod, looking serious.

“You will have one,” he assured Wei Wuxian, voice completely calm in a way that made Wei Wuxian’s breath hitch over the sheer normalcy of it. Wei Wuxian swallowed past the growing tightness in his throat, wondering how he had ended up in the presence of a man so kind when Lan Wangji continued.

“Would Wei Ying attend meetings once he is feeling better?”

“Do you mean my lessons?” Wei Wuxian asked and Lan Wangji tilted his head, looking momentarily confused before he shook his head.

“Attend the meetings I take as a crown prince,” Lan Wangji clarified.

“Why would they let me into those meetings?” Wei Wuxian asked. He had barely been able to attend meetings as the head disciple of Lotus Pier, let alone ones intended for the crown prince.

Lan Wangji’s tail thumped against the ground and his gaze darkened. “Wei Ying is my husband, and you have done well in your classes,” he stated, as if it explained anything.

“But I’m a *huli jing*. No one will ever trust me during a meeting,” he replied. It was one thing when no one knew what he was, but he couldn’t forget what happened at the last cultivation conference, nor the glares he had seen from those he passed in the palace halls.

“Did Wei Ying’s people not trust him during the war?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Yes, but that was *different,”* Wei Wuxian said. The Jiang had known what he was since Jiang Fengmian brought him to Lotus Pier as a kit, and had seen him tumble off the piers enough to not care. People from the other sects hadn’t known, had only seen a determined general standing beside the Jiang heir as battles raged around them.

“It is not.”

“But Lan Zhan—”

“If Wei Ying wishes to help, he may,” Lan Wangji said, stopping Wei Wuxian’s protest. It was at this point that Wei Wuxian realized he wasn’t going to win this argument. His husband was more stubborn than expected, and Wei Wuxian would have to ignore the worry digging its nails into his chest.

“Alright, I’ll attend,” Wei Wuxian allowed, reminding himself that it wouldn’t bother him if he was swiftly kicked from the meetings. *He had been removed from them before.* “But what are the meetings for anyways?”

“War reparations,” Lan Wangji said. “We are still adjusting trade agreements with the main sects.”

Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji, interest sparking in his eyes. “Are the war camps part of these negotiations?”

“They are,” Lan Wangji confirmed and Wei Wuxian carefully concealed his excitement. He didn’t want to seem too eager as his mind whirled. Because if they were talking about the war camps they would likely mention where the camps were and how the remaining Wen were being treated.

Jiang Cheng and he had come up empty from their own searches; little information making its way to the Jiang when they hadn’t offered to take any prisoners themselves.

“It is not a priority, however, as the Jin volunteered to oversee the camps,” Lan Wangji said. Wei Wuxian bit his tongue, hard, and grounded himself in the taste of iron filling his mouth. *Of course those peacocks volunteered, they wanted free labor from people who wouldn’t scream when they—*

Wei Wuxian’s thoughts cut off when a loud shout rang from outside Lan Wangji’s room. The shout was angry, echoed by several others, and dissolved into the sound of clashing swords.

Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian were on their feet in seconds, Lan Wangji reaching for his sword as Wei Wuxian tried not to stumble under the wave of pain that washed over him from moving too fast. He breathed, spots dancing in his vision as Lan Wangji stepped in front of him, body tensed.

There was another loud clatter of swords, the sound of something breaking, and then a familiar roar cut through the noise; furious in a way that sent a chill down his spine. Lan Wangji unsheathed his sword, stepping forward as Wei Wuxian grabbed the back of his robes.

“Wait, that sounds like—” Wei Wuxian started, and then in a flurry of black fur, the doors to Lan Wangji’s room slammed open as Jiang Cheng stormed in.

Chapter End Notes

AND YOU THOUGHT I'D FORGOTTEN ABOUT JIANG CHENG.
-cackles-

Extra:
LXC, trying to explain to LWJ why A-Yuan was confused: Didi, it's because we look very much alike. (^u^)
LWJ: ...
LWJ: ...
LWJ: ...but I am not you. There should be no confusion.
LXC, singular tear in his eye: Of course, didi. Whatever you say.

Bonus Extra:
-LXC, cheerfully announcing that he has someone he considers like a spouse-

LQR: Why are my nephews trying to kill me.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience! (^u^)///

Jiang Cheng scowled at me until I finished this chapter. Enjoy the angry grape.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jiang Cheng's spirit form filled the entrance to Lan Wangji's room, his hackles raised and fur rippling as he bared his teeth and growled.

Lan Wangji quickly stepped in front of Wei Wuxian and protectively held out an arm. Jiang Cheng's tail lashed, his claws digging into the wooden floor in preparation for an attack.

As soon as Jiang Cheng lunged, Wei Wuxian darted around Lan Wangji.

"Don't!"

"Wei Ying!"

Wei Wuxian's shout mixed with Lan Wangji's, and Jiang Cheng changed course at the last moment, skidding to the floor only a pace away with his ears pressed against his head.

Wei Wuxian barely had time to breathe before Jiang Cheng shifted back into his human form, transitioning as smoothly as water flowing in a river. He alighted on his feet, tail still fluffy and lashing, and Wei Wuxian recoiled from the fury in his eyes.

"Where have you been?" Jiang Cheng snarled and dread curled through Wei Wuxian's chest. Because Jiang Cheng was absolutely *livid.* Hands clenched at his sides, breath unsteady, and eyes full of a rage Wei Wuxian hadn't seen since they had fought in the war.

And never directed at him.

"Why didn't you respond to our letters?" Jiang Cheng continued, pulling Wei Wuxian from his thoughts. "Do you think you're too important to talk to us anymore? Because I don't give a shit about status. I told you I'd drag you home if you didn't write back, *and you haven't written back."*

"You wrote me letters?" Wei Wuxian asked. Jiang Cheng recoiled in clear surprise, and then the anger drained from his eyes.

"Of course I wrote you letters," Jiang Cheng said, his shoulders and gaze falling. "Jiejie did too." His expression twisted and he glared harder at the ground. "You made her cry."

Wei Wuxian froze, bile creeping up his throat. Because despite everything he had done wrong at Lotus Pier over the years, he had only made shijie cry once and it had been *awful.*

He had still been a kit and new to Lotus Pier when he had shown shijie his spirit form, transforming with a playful bark under the moonlight and running circles around her until she had started weeping.

Wei Wuxian had felt nothing but panicked horror as he transformed back and clung to her skirts, apologizing and insisting that *he'd be good and wouldn't break the rules again.*

His sister had wept harder at that, and Wei Wuxian had found himself tucked against her chest, clinging desperately as she shook. They hadn't parted until Jiang Cheng found them and shoved Wei Wuxian into the lake for making his jiejie sad.

A chill spread over Wei Wuxian when Lan Wangji stepped to his side; he left a crackle of ice in his wake as frost crawled over his skin like fragmented stars. He looked like he had eaten something bitter, his brow furrowed and lips parted as if trying to formulate a response.

"I never received any letters," Wei Wuxian hesitantly said when Lan Wangji didn't speak. "I swear I didn't."

Jiang Cheng scoffed, the sound harsh and wet as if he was holding back tears. *Shit.*

"How can you expect me to believe that?"

Jiang Cheng brusquely wiped his face with a sleeve. "We've exchanged other letters with the Lan without any issues. Why would yours be the only ones not to arrive?" he asked, and then wrinkled his nose and deliberately sniffed the air.

"Wait, why do I smell blood?" Jiang Cheng asked, stalking around Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian wasn't quick enough to stop Jiang Cheng from seeing the bandages on his tails, and he flinched when Jiang Cheng snarled.

Wei Wuxian found himself shoved behind Jiang Cheng as he growled at Lan Wangji, his tail fluffed and lashing.

"What did you do to him?" Jiang Cheng snapped.

Wei Wuxian grabbed Jiang Cheng's robes, digging his nails into his shoulder as he forced a laugh. "Aiya, Jiang Cheng, I'm fi—"

"Did. You. Steal. His. Tails?" Jiang Cheng spat, his words clipped and deadly.

Lan Wangji blinked, the smallest crease in his brow as ice crept across the floor.

Several tense moments passed, and then Jiang Cheng cursed and reached for his sword, lunging toward Lan Wangji.

"You sick piece of shit!"

Wei Wuxian panicked and pulled Jiang Cheng back. “Lan Zhan would never—”

“Count them.”

Lan Wangji’s voice was uncannily steady as frost climbed over him, dusting his shoulders and neck. He looked cold, severe and harsh in a way that jarred against Wei Wuxian’s memory of Lan Wangji’s soft smiles.

Jiang Cheng paused, narrowing his eyes. Lan Wangji flicked his gaze to Wei Wuxian. “See for yourself.”

Wei Wuxian released Jiang Cheng’s robes and backed away, holding up his hands when Jiang Cheng turned around. “There’s no need to count!” he chittered, trying to keep the panic from showing on his face.

Because Jiang Cheng couldn’t count his tails.

Or else he’d realize that Wei Wuxian only had eight tails instead of nine.

“They’re all there, I swear.”

Jiang Cheng frowned but stopped bristling, his tail fur smoothing.

“But someone did try to steal them,” Jiang Cheng said, his tone brokering no argument.

“Yes,” Wei Wuxian allowed, shifting his gaze to Lan Wangji. Frost clung to his arms, his breathing shallow and quick despite his placid expression. Wei Wuxian pursed his lips and closed the distance between them, watching Lan Wangji’s face before he smoothed his hands over Lan Wangji’s forearms.

Ice cracked under Wei Wuxian’s touch, cold and biting. Lan Wangji closed his eyes, breathing deeply until the ice melted. Wei Wuxian hadn’t been sure Lan Wangji would accept his touch, but he was relieved when the frost vanished and color returned to Lan Wangji’s skin.

Only once it was gone did Wei Wuxian turn to Jiang Cheng, whose expression had twisted into a complicated mess.

“If we’re going to talk about this, we might as well do it over tea,” Wei Wuxian suggested, then knelt at the low table and cleared the paperwork away.

Jiang Cheng glared at Lan Wangji but followed, kneeling across from Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji joined them a moment later, sitting beside Wei Wuxian and curling his tail around Wei Wuxian’s knees.

The weight of Lan Wangji’s tail was oddly comforting, and Wei Wuxian grounded himself in the steady touch as he prepared the tea, trying to ignore the growing tension between Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian poured the tea and then hesitated, gnawing his cheek and wrapping his hands around his cup, unsure how to explain everything without making Jiang Cheng angrier.

And then a loud noise echoed from the hallway and Wei Wuxian startled, spilling tea over his hands as guards rushed into the room with their swords drawn. Wei Wuxian hissed in pain, hurriedly setting down his cup and wiping his hands on his robes.

“Your highnesses, are you—” The head guard stopped and paused in the doorway, looking at the three of them in surprise. The guards behind him looked similarly shocked, shuffling awkwardly behind the head guard, their robes mussed and torn.

Lan Wangji blinked at the guards, frowning softly as he pulled a cloth from his sleeve and covered it in frost. “Be careful,” Lan Wangji said, then pressed the cloth over Wei Wuxian’s hands.

“There is no issue here,” Lan Wangji added, addressing the head guard. The guard shifted in clear confusion, and a few others glared at Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng returned their look, lifting a brow as if daring them to protest.

Surprisingly, one did.

“But your highness, the Jiang ambassador isn’t allowed to enter the prince’s personal quarters.”

“You are dismissed,” Lan Wangji replied, and the guard who had spoken clicked his mouth shut and bowed, murmuring apologizes. Another moment and the guards left, closing the door behind them.

“It was too easy for me to get here,” Jiang Cheng said as soon as the door shut, his ears twitching. “Probably because there are too many holes in the palace defenses.”

“Ah, I meant to tell Lan Zhan about that,” Wei Wuxian responded as he smoothed the cold cloth over his hands. He stilled when Jiang Cheng snorted, realizing his error and snapping his gaze to Lan Wangji.

“This one apologizes for—” Wei Wuxian stopped when Lan Wangji tipped his head.

“Do not apologize for making an observation.” Lan Wangji said, his tone gentle as he poured Wei Wuxian more tea.

Wei Wuxian nodded and let himself relax. Jiang Cheng raised a brow but didn’t comment, sipping his tea. He made a face, muttered that *even their tea was bland,* then flushed when he noticed Lan Wangji watching him.

Wei Wuxian hid a laugh by taking a drink and blanched when it burned his tongue. Without looking, Lan Wangji brushed a hand over the rim of Wei Wuxian’s cup and the steam dissipated. Wei Wuxian tentatively sipped the tea and let out a pleased noise, turning to Lan Wangji.

“Have you always been able to cool tea?”

Lan Wangji avoided Wei Wuxian’s gaze.

“Mn.”

“My husband is the best!” Wei Wuxian laughed. “This fox will never burn his poor tongue again.” He grinned when Lan Wangji’s ears turned red, and was leaning closer to Lan Wangji when Jiang Cheng let out a frustrated growl.

“Stop messing around.”

Jiang Cheng angrily downed his tea, face flushing at the heat. “No one wants to see—” he waved a hand at Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. “—*that.”*

“See what, Chengcheng?” Wei Wuxian asked, then darted behind Lan Wangji when Jiang Cheng lunged toward him.

“Don’t call me that!”

“But A-Cheng is my precious shidi!” Wei Wuxian grinned, shouting *Lan Zhan, save me!* as Jiang Cheng lurched around the table.

Lan Wangji’s fingers twitched around his tea, and then a patch of ice spread across the floor.

Jiang Cheng slipped on the ice and sailed past Wei Wuxian, skidding into the wall. Wei Wuxian whooped and leaned against Lan Wangji, holding his sides as he laughed until his sides hurt.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, that was amazing!”

Lan Wangji hummed, his lips twitching into a faint smile. Wei Wuxian stared, momentarily stunned before he leaned forward and poked the corner of Lan Wangji’s face.

“Was that a smile? Eh? Lan Zhan, do it again!”

“Sit properly. Wei Ying will hurt himself.”

Wei Wuxian whined and draped himself over Lan Wangji, letting himself go limp. “But Lan Zhan, this husband—”

“Stop being gross!” Jiang Cheng interrupted, scowling as he brushed off his robes and retook his seat across from them. Wei Wuxian stuck his tongue out at his brother and Jiang Cheng grimaced, reaching for his tea before noticing he had knocked it over.

His scowl grew more intense as he angrily cleaned it up then poured himself more tea.

“Enough. You’re not a kit anymore. Tell me how you were injured,” Jiang Cheng demanded. Wei Wuxian sighed and slipped from Lan Wangji’s lap—feeling the gentle touch of a guiding hand brush against his side—and knelt properly.

“It really wasn’t a big deal,” Wei Wuxian said. “I went to Caiyi and someone attacked me on my way back. They didn’t get more than a broken nose out of it.”

“It was serious,” Lan Wangji added and Wei Wuxian winced, unable to meet Jiang Cheng’s gaze. “Wei Ying passed out from his injuries during a lesson.”

“Why didn’t the guards protect him?” Jiang Cheng asked. Lan Wangji quietly drank his tea, his eyes trailing to Jiang Cheng’s hands.

“There weren’t any with him. He left without alerting anyone.”

“So he snuck out,” Jiang Cheng grimaced, looking at Wei Wuxian. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Wei Wuxian flicked his ears back, waving a hand. “I just wanted some good food!”

“The fuck?” Jiang Cheng asked, then stopped Wei Wuxian from responding. “You know what? No. There’s no sense talking to you.” Jiang Cheng turned to Lan Wangji with narrowed eyes. “You were supposed to protect him.”

Lan Wangji’s hands tightened around his cup.

“I have erred in caring for him,” Lan Wangji said, then bowed at Jiang Cheng. Wei Wuxian froze when Lan Wangji bowed lower than necessary. Jiang Cheng similarly stilled, his face full of disbelief.

“I have since corrected my behavior,” Lan Wangji added, as if he had done something wrong. As if he hadn’t been considerate and kind to a *huli jing* to the point where Wei Wuxian had been starting to wonder if Lan Wangji didn’t dislike his presence.

If instead, maybe he enjoyed spending time with Wei Wuxian.

“Like hell you have,” Jiang Cheng replied, looking faintly surprised by his own response. He crossed his arms as a faint dust of red filled his cheeks. “…He’s too thin.”

“Mn.”

Wei Wuxian winced, wishing he could sink into his robes and hide.

“I have started cooking his meals—”

“You’re doing *what?”* Wei Wuxian interjected, but Lan Wangji kept talking.

“—and would listen to advice on his favorite dishes,” Lan Wangji finished then drank his tea. Jiang Cheng blinked before shaking himself and mirroring Lan Wangji’s movements. He set his cup down and gave Lan Wangji a discerning look.

“His favorite food is our jiejie’s pork rib and lotus root soup.”

“Jiang Cheng, food is food; favorites don’t matter," Wei Wuxian insisted, batting at his tea to get him to stop. His brother merely scowled and pulled his tea out of reach.

“He hates plain rice and puts too much spice into everything, even for someone from Yunmeng,” Jiang Cheng added, and then ignored Wei Wuxian’s protests and continued listing off the foods he preferred.

Lan Wangji hummed and nodded, listening carefully as his tail flicked against the ground. At some point Wei Wuxian gave up and melted against the table, burying his head in his arms while Jiang Cheng’s voice washed over him.

By the time their tea had long grown cold, Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji had extensively discussed things about Wei Wuxian that made him want to crawl into a nest and hide. Including his dislike for listening to Wen Qing and his tendency to get into trouble no matter where he went.

Lan Wangji had attentively listened the entire time, and seemed pleased when Jiang Cheng said he could write to Jiang Yanli if he wanted to know more.

Disgruntled, Wei Wuxian lifted his head with a pout.

“Lan Zhan, Jiang Cheng’s here for me but I haven’t gotten to talk to him properly yet.”

“For once, he’s right,” Jiang Cheng said as he absently drank his tea, then blanched at the taste and hastily set it aside. “I was hoping to talk to him alone.”

Lan Wangji hesitated, glancing at Wei Wuxian before he inclined his head. “You may use the courtyard.”

“Thanks Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian replied and then quickly hauled Jiang Cheng from the table and into the courtyard. Jiang Cheng protested and hissed the entire way, trying and failing to pull free from Wei Wuxian’s grip.

He scowled and jerked Wei Wuxian to a halt in the middle of the courtyard, head whipping around. Wei Wuxian swallowed the pain that flared from his tails at the abrupt stop and turned to see the source of Jiang Cheng’s ire.

Lan Wangji knelt at the entrance to the courtyard like a proper disciple, hands folded and face placid as he returned Jiang Cheng’s look.

“How is this being alone?” Jiang Cheng demanded, tail lashing. Lan Wangji simply blinked in return, otherwise unresponsive. Jiang Cheng growled, spun around, then dragged Wei Wuxian until they were as far from Lan Wangji as the courtyard allowed.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry by the time Jiang Cheng released him. His tails throbbed and his husband was still staring but *Jiang Cheng was here.*

Jiang Cheng crossed his arms, ears perking. “Excluding the idiotic things you’ve likely done to yourself, have the Lan hurt you?”

The laughter bubbling in Wei Wuxian's chest immediately vanished.

"Isn't it better to ask how I've been doing? To hear how I've been hidden away like a fair maiden?" Wei Wuxian asked. Jiang Cheng glared, his scowl growing more intense.

"You're not a maiden," he snapped. "There's no way you've been able to follow all of the Lan rules, and everyone knows how harsh Lan punishments are. So tell me, have the Lan whipped you?"

Wei Wuxian's breath caught as Jiang Cheng stepped closer.

"If you try to lie I'll ask Liu Qing," Jiang Cheng quietly threatened. *"And if they've hurt you I'll burn the palace down."*

"Jiang Cheng!" Wei Wuxian hissed, lunging forward and slapping a hand over Jiang Cheng's mouth. "There's no need to say such things. Why would the Lan whip me? I'm nothing more than the price of a trade agreement. Better kept locked away than dealt with."

Jiang Cheng licked his hand and Wei Wuxian quickly pulled it away, whining in protest. Jiang Cheng smacked his shoulder, refusing to let Wei Wuxian moan and cling like they did when they were children.

"I said you're *not* a maiden!" Jiang Cheng said. "And stop talking like they've managed to keep you confined in one place."

Wei Wuxian wasn't quick enough to hide the way his expression twisted.

Jiang Cheng paused, looked Wei Wuxian over, then spun and stormed over to Lan Wangji.

"You fucking *locked him away?"*

Lan Wangji's mouth twitched in a frown. "There was a miscommunication."

"A *miscommunication?* The fuck does that—"

"Jiang Cheng, it's alright," Wei Wuxian insisted as he rushed over. He felt something tear near the base of his tails as he ran and a stabbing pain shot up his back. Warmth spread out from his lower back and he carefully kept it turned away from the others.

He would be fine.

Jiang Cheng was still yelling at Lan Wangji, however, and Wei Wuxian belatedly realized he had missed part of the conversation.

"He's not lying!" Wei Wuxian interjected when Jiang Cheng reached for his sword. "There really was a mistake in what I'd been told, which was nothing, really."

Jiang Cheng snarled, his anger flaring as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "So what you're saying is that you thought being told nothing meant you weren't allowed to leave, because you're an idiot."

“Yes.”

“Wei Ying is not an idiot.”

Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Wangji in surprise.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked, then smiled when Lan Wangji looked away and his tail thumped against the ground. “Lan Zhan, do you think I’m smart?”

“Mn,” Lan Wangji said, ducking his head, and then Jiang Cheng shoved his way between them.

“Stop! I said no being gross!”

Wei Wuxian laughed and draped himself over Jiang Cheng’s shoulders.

“Just wait until Madam Yu arranges your marriage,” Wei Wuxian said. “Then you’ll be gross with your wife!”

Jiang Cheng fumed, his face turning bright red. “Well what of it? At least I won’t be as bad as Jin Zixuan,” he grumbled.

“Lan Zhan, I apologize for my shidi,” Wei Wuxian lamented as he released Jiang Cheng and sat beside Lan Wangji, keeping his back turned away. The pain lessened when he let his tails rest against the floor, and he silently prayed his robes would hide the blood.

“He’s too young to understand the ways of marriage,” Wei Wuxian added, ignoring Jiang Cheng’s immediate protest. “Although it’s true no one can be worse than the peacock.”

“I’m a *few days* younger than you,” Jiang Cheng muttered then glanced at Lan Wangji, who looked unruffled despite their banter. “But speaking of jiejie’s wedding, Wei Wuxian will be there, won’t he?”

“We will be sending a delegation,” Lan Wangji replied and Wei Wuxian stilled. He hadn’t forgotten about shijie’s wedding, but he had assumed he might need to sneak out to attend, and hadn’t gotten around to broaching the subject with Lan Wangji.

“Jiang-guniang is Wei Ying’s family. He will attend. Wei Yuan and myself will join him,” Lan Wangji said, as simply as if it was a given. *Which it wouldn’t have been, had he stayed at Lotus Pier.* Wei Wuxian shied away from his thoughts and plastered on a smile, leaning into Lan Wangji’s side.

“You see? Nothing to worry about!” Wei Wuxian said, his smile faltering.

Because his shijie was getting *married,* and despite it being to the peacock it meant she would be starting a family of her own. *But he’d get to see her wearing red, as beautiful as she always was. And if they had little ones, they’d run around like A-Yuan and call him shishu and—*

“Why are you crying?” Jiang Cheng asked, mildly horrified. Wei Wuxian sniffled, and then Lan Wangji tugged on his sleeve, looked at him with a serious expression, and insisted that *Wei Ying needn’t cry.*

His husband was going to *ruin* him.

“Reports indicate Jin Zixuan feels nothing but affection for Jiang-guniang,” Lan Wangji said seriously, as if it wasn’t absurd that there apparently were Lans running around collecting reports on others' marital arrangements. Wei Wuxian softly laughed, trying and failing to stifle his amusement as he wiped his eyes.

“And if he makes her cry, I’ll break his legs,” Jiang Cheng said solemnly. Lan Wangji looked like he wasn’t sure whether Jiang Cheng was being serious or not and Wei Wuxian doubled over, unable to hold back his amusement.

The movement yanked on his tails however and he winced, hurrying to sit up to relieve the pain.

Both Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng had gone still.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Wei Wuxian asked. Jiang Cheng curled his lip and walked around Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian held up his hands in protest. “What are you doing, Jiang Cheng? I already told you there’s no need to count!”

Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms, looking over Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. Wei Wuxian felt a chill growing against his side and turned.

Lan Wangji was staring silently at his one hand, which was covered in blood.

Blood that was slowly creeping onto Lan Wangji’s robes.

Wei Wuxian swore and looked down to see that the blood from his tails was touching Lan Wangji’s robes, a slow poison ruining the pristine fabric. Wei Wuxian hastily pushed himself to his feet, apologizing as he backed away only to feel himself buckle under the rush of pain.

Large hands wrapped around his waist, gentle and persistent despite how they were bathed in red.

“Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian flinched, chuckling as he tried pulling himself free. “I’m fine, Lan Zhan. I probably just pulled a stitch, nothing serious.”

“Bleeding all over the crown prince isn’t serious?” Jiang Cheng scoffed, a flicker of worry flashing through his eyes. “Hanguang-jun, if you can get my idiot brother inside, I’ll find Liu Qing.”

Lan Wangji nodded and tightened his hold around Wei Wuxian’s waist, stopping him before he could protest. Jiang Cheng’s eyes dropped to Lan Wangji’s hands and then he shook his head, striding inside.

“Wei Ying should be careful,” Lan Wangji said as he guided Wei Wuxian into his room and onto a cushion. Wei Wuxian tried arguing that he didn’t need a cushion—it would only be ruined, after all—but Lan Wangji ignored his protests.

Instead, he settled Wei Wuxian gently, hands brushing red streaks onto his robes as he smoothed his hands over Wei Wuxian’s shoulders, as if checking that he was alright. His lips were shaped into a displeased frown as he did this and Wei Wuxian’s breath caught, unprepared for such a handsome face making such a petulant expression.

Wei Wuxian lost himself in his thoughts, amazed that the worry was for him. *Like how shijie had been when he had stayed too long for punishment with Madam Yu. A soft frown that wouldn’t leave even when Wei Wuxian had insisted he was alright.*

And that he had deserved the marks for breaking the rules.

“Why am I not surprised that you couldn’t go more than a few days without hurting yourself?” Wen Qing sighed as she entered the room, Jiang Cheng following close behind. “Don’t answer that,” she threatened when Wei Wuxian started to respond. “It is forbidden to lie.”

“Liu Qing,” Wei Wuxian whined, then steadied himself on Lan Wangji when another jolt of pain washed over him. He gritted his teeth against it, closing his eyes and forcing himself to breathe until the pain settled into something manageable.

“You should’ve sent for me sooner,” Wen Qing sighed as Wei Wuxian opened his eyes. She had settled beside him, her tools laid out on the floor as Jiang Cheng hovered over her shoulder.

“It’s nothing,” Wei Wuxian tried, then stiffened when a low growl rippled through the room.

“It is not…,” Lan Wangji started, his voice low and angry. “Wei Ying must…,” he frowned, hands tightening around Wei Wuxian. “Why does Wei Ying not—”

“Your highness, can he lie down on your lap?” Wen Qing interjected, and Jiang Cheng spluttered.

“Can he *what—”*

“I cannot reach his tails easily when he’s sitting,” Wen Qing continued, ignoring Jiang Cheng’s protests. Lan Wangji hesitated then tugged Wei Wuxian, maneuvering him until he found himself with his face pillowed in Lan Wangji’s lap.

Wei Wuxian pressed his ears back, holding as still as possible. Lan Wangji’s lap was surprisingly soft, and he tried not thinking about where exactly his face was resting. Because Lan Wangji’s stomach was *right there,* which meant that *a certain part* was even closer.

He didn’t notice when Wen Qing pulled his robes from his tail, but he lifted his head when Lan Wangji tightened his grip around him.

“Do not look,” Lan Wangji said, and it took Wei Wuxian several moments to realize he had been talking to Jiang Cheng.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen already,” Jiang Cheng scoffed, refusing to turn away. Wei Wuxian silently bemoaned his luck, letting his head fall back into his husband’s lap. *Jiang Cheng, there’s no need to watch!*

The silence stretched and Lan Wangji tensed against Wei Wuxian, growing cold. When he didn’t respond Wei Wuxian chanced a look, and was shocked to see Lan Wangji’s lips pursed as if in pain, his golden eyes closed.

“Jiang Cheng, turn around” Wei Wuxian said, watching Lan Wangji’s face until Jiang Cheng huffed and shuffled away. Only then did Lan Wangji relax and open his eyes, meeting Wei Wuxian’s gaze for a moment before Wen Qing pulled the bandages from Wei Wuxian’s tails.

Wei Wuxian buried his head back in Lan Wangji’s lap as pain rolled over him, clinging like a child and shaking until Wen Qing finished her work.

At some point, Lan Wangji must have cleaned his hands because he started running his hands over Wei Wuxian’s hair, and Wei Wuxian sunk into the gentle movement until he heard Wen Qing packing her things.

“You should let him rest,” Wen Qing murmured, and Wei Wuxian turned his head enough to see Jiang Cheng’s displeased look as he turned back around. He opened his mouth then seemed to reconsider, his tail flicking back and forth.

“Fine,” Jiang Cheng allowed, then looked at Wei Wuxian. “But we’re going to talk properly later. I’m staying for a fortnight as the Jiang ambassador, so you can’t say there’s not enough time.”

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian allowed. “And if I get suibian back, once I’m healed we can spar like old times while we’re at it.”

“*If* you get suibian back?” Jiang Cheng echoed, then bared his teeth at Lan Wangji. “What the *fuck,* Hanguang-jun?” He snapped, taking a step forward before Wen Qing stepped between them.

“Not now, Liu Qing, I have to—”

“You will not threaten the crown prince,” Wen Qing interjected, her voice deadly and calm. “Stand down.”

Wen Qing pulled out a needle when Jiang Cheng didn’t move. Only then did Jiang Cheng quickly back away, glaring at Lan Wangji.

“Fix this,” Jiang Cheng snapped.

Lan Wangji’s hand paused against Wei Wuxian’s head, minutely shaking. “Given time, I will rectify the issue.”

Wei Wuxian could only watch as Jiang Cheng stiffly nodded and left the room, Wen Qing following behind.

“Lan Zhan, I was joking. I know I’m not allowed to wield a sword in the palace quarters,” Wei Wuxian said, sinking further against Lan Wangji as he pushed away his yearning for suibian. It wouldn’t do to dwell on the impossible.

“No.”

Wei Wuxian turned his head enough to meet Lan Wangji’s gaze.

“Wei Ying may do whatever he wants,” Lan Wangji added, serious enough that Wei Wuxian felt his protests die in his throat. “For now, rest.”

Wei Wuxian found himself powerless in the face of Lan Wangji’s concern, unable to do more than hum in acceptance and bury his face against Lan Wangji’s robes.

Thankfully Lan Wangji didn’t seem to mind, and returned to drawing his hands through Wei Wuxian’s hair, soothing and rhythmic until Wei Wuxian drifted to sleep surrounded by Lan Wangji’s calming scent and warmth.

Chapter End Notes

I'm tempted to give Wen Qing a "days since Wei Wuxian has hurt himself" board.

Also wangxian *basically* cuddling makes my mind go burrrrr

Extra:
JC, storming into the throne room: Where the hell is my brother?!
LXC, pleasantly surprised: Probably with Wangji, why?
JC: -kicks down several guards and runs off-
LXC: ...
LXC: ...
LXC: Why are the Jiang like this? TuT"

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Aksjd I was so excited about this chapter that I may not have reviewed it as closely as I usually do. So if you see any typos no you didn't.

Despite my excitement this took me awhile because I had to rewrite various sections because the characters had very strong (tm) opinions about what I had originally wrote. So I hope you enjoy this extra-long beast, as I think it's the longest chapter I've ever written for a fic (there was no good place to split it). TuT

And please know that every kudos/comment keeps me going when I wake up and wonder how anyone could ever enjoy what I'm writing because writing is hard.

Content warnings in the end notes (they are a bit spoilery this time, as a warning.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air grew colder by the day, and Wei Wuxian wasn't looking forward to the chill of winter once it settled over Gusu. He had been confined to Lan Wangji's rooms for the last week by Wen Qing, who in true Jiang fashion had hissed and snapped at Wei Wuxian when he complained until he reluctantly conceded.

Tearing his stiches had set his healing back enough that Wen Qing returned to checking up on him daily. Jiang Cheng—although he would never admit it—had also frequently stopped by, scowling at Lan Wangji whenever he was there and pestering Wei Wuxian about Shijie's wedding arrangements when they were alone.

By the end of the week, Wei Wuxian practically leapt from his bed when Wen Qing said he could return to his daily activities.

"Only some of them", she had threatened, and Wei Wuxian waved her worry away as he relished being able to walk around without pain radiating up his back. He wasn't fully healed, but his cultivation was high enough that Wen Qing had removed the remaining stiches and said he could walk without needing support.

Not that Wei Wuxian *hadn't* enjoyed his husband's protective grip around his waist whenever he helped Wei Wuxian around their rooms, but being able to go where he wanted without issue did more to quell the nerves threatening to consume him due to his forced inactivity.

Currently, Wei Wuxian was sitting with Jiang Cheng at the entrance to Lan Wangji's private courtyard while Lan Wangji worked inside on paperwork, leaving them to watch A-Yuan chase Mo Xuanyu around in what looked like a game of tag. Mo Xuanyu appeared to be

doing poorly, however, judging by A-Yuan's adorable protests and Mo Xuanyu's flustered squeaks.

Jiang Cheng scowled into his cup of tea as he watched. And after some time of sitting in silence, Wei Wuxian sighed and leaned back on his hands, tipping his face toward the sky.

"What's Lotus Pier been like?" Wei Wuxian asked, swallowing the *without me there* as he absently played with Lan Wangji's jade token—still tied to his belt until his own was finished, the weight solid and comforting. Jiang Cheng set his cup down with a sharp *clink* and Wei Wuxian glanced at him, taking in his sharp scowl and twitching ears.

"It's weird," Jiang Cheng grumbled, his eyes still trained on A-Yuan. "Too quiet. And I can't get anything done without our shidi demanding to know how you've been doing, not that you've been helpful on that front."

Wei Wuxian groaned, leaning toward Jiang Cheng. "A-Cheng, I told you it wasn't my fault!"

"You—!" Jiang Cheng threw his half-empty cup at Wei Wuxian, who easily dodged, grinning wide as he lamented the waste of such fine tea.

"How is it a waste when you hate the tea here?!" Jiang Cheng demanded, then looked around for something else to throw. Finding nothing but Wei Wuxian's own cup—which Wei Wuxian hastily moved out of reach—Jiang Cheng scowled and crossed his arms with a huff, his tail lashing.

"Aiya, Jiang Cheng, don't be like that. Why don't you tell me how the preparations for Shijie's wedding have been going?" Wei Wuxian asked, finishing his tea and setting it aside. Jiang Cheng scowled more, but after a few moments reluctantly replied.

"Jiejie should only have the best, and A-Niang has been ordering everyone around to make sure it happens." Jiang Cheng pulled his clarity bell into his hands from his belt, letting it chime before he used his spiritual energy to silence it. "She also took over the formal negotiations with the Jin when A-Die got sick, and acts like you never lived at Lotus Pier."

Wei Wuxian laughed off Madam Yu's behavior, then paused when the full meaning of what Jiang Cheng said registered.

"Wait, Jiang-shushu's sick? How?" Wei Wuxian asked. Cultivators rarely fell sick in the first place, especially one as strong as Jiang Fengmian, and Wei Wuxian half-expected Jiang Cheng to say that Jiang Fengmian's fights with Madam Yu had finally taken their toll.

"Poison from a demonic boar," Jiang Cheng replied. "A-Die went out with some disciples to take care of one near the edges of our territory."

"And he failed to purify it?"

"No, you idiot," Jiang Cheng huffed. "The boar spewed poison upon death and A-Die took the brunt of it to protect the disciples. He recovered after a day, but has lingering headaches and nausea, and our healers have refused to let him do anything but the least stressful duties."

Wei Wuxian grimaced at the thought of Madam Yu storming around Lotus pier, commanding disciples left and right without Jiang Fengmian there to stop her. Not that he ever truly did, but he usually managed to quell Madam Yu's ire enough that the disciples weren't shaking in their robes from fear.

"But enough about home," Jiang Cheng said, avoiding Wei Wuxian's gaze. "I know you've been doing shitty, but what about A-Yuan?"

Wei Wuxian squawked at the insult and threw his empty cup at Jiang Cheng, watching in satisfaction when it hit him squarely in the face. Jiang Cheng yelped and glared at Wei Wuxian, then proceeded to throw the cup back before tackling him.

They scuffled for several moments, Wei Wuxian laughing and pestering Jiang Cheng until Jiang Cheng pinned him on his stomach and sat on his back.

"Jiang Cheng, have you gained weight? You're so heavy!" Wei Wuxian whined, kicking his legs. Jiang Cheng dug his knees into Wei Wuxian's back in retaliation, staying well above the base of his tails.

"Who's gained weight?" Jiang Cheng demanded, pressing down harder as he leaned over Wei Wuxian and scowled.

"Alright, alright, I yield!" Wei Wuxian cried, keeping up his protests until Jiang Cheng rolled off. Wei Wuxian laughed as he pushed himself into a sitting position, joy bubbling through him at the familiar play.

"Stop distracting me," Jiang Cheng grumbled, gesturing toward A-Yuan and Mo Xuanyu. The two were still playing tag, with Mo Xuanyu now chasing A-Yuan. Mo Xuanyu looked mildly terrified by what was happening, and Wei Wuxian laughed as he debated whether he might need to intervene.

"Wei Wuxian, be serious," Jiang Cheng demanded. Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes and waved a hand, promising that he'd take things seriously. Jiang Cheng didn't look convinced.

"Tell me how they've been treating A-Yuan."

"He's been doing well, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian replied, letting himself settle as he watched his son play. "They've been treating him like a prince." Wei Wuxian smiled as he pictured how sticky and spoiled A-Yuan had gotten around Lan Wangji recently in particular.

Anytime they shared a meal, A-Yuan insisted on sitting between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian, patting both their legs before he allowed himself to eat. When he was done, and regardless of whether Lan Wangji had finished himself, A-Yuan would crawl into his lap and bury himself against his chest.

Wei Wuxian couldn't help but smile every time it happened, because Lan Wangji never protested; merely nipped A-Yuan's ears, repeated the rule about asking permission before imposing oneself on another, then quietly finished eating.

“He is a prince now, isn’t he? They better treat him like one.”

Wei Wuxian hesitated, throwing Jiang Cheng a confused look. Jiang Cheng’s ears twitched and his expression twisted.

“Wei Wuxian, you married the crown prince and the emperor has no children. What else would A-Yuan be?”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“You never do,” Jiang Cheng said as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I take it that there haven’t been any *miscommunications* regarding A-Yuan then?”

Wei Wuxian winced at Jiang Cheng’s tone. “There haven’t,” Wei Wuxian replied, his ears twitching at the thought. Aside from the issue with the Lan wanting to keep A-Yuan in the nursery, A-Yuan had been nothing but spoiled with attention and care compared to Lotus Pier.

How they treated Wei Wuxian was one thing, but he’d have torn the palace apart had they mistreated his son.

“And your features…the Lan don’t mind?” Jiang Cheng slowly asked, as if voicing the question might call unwanted attention to their visible features. A familiar shudder went through Wei Wuxian and he clenched his hands, ignoring the spike of fear at the reminder that his and A-Yuan’s features were showing.

Wen Qing had repeatedly reminded him over the past week that showing his features wasn’t against the rules and Lan Wangji hadn’t said anything about it, but it still felt *wrong.*

Like he was sneaking behind Madam Yu’s back, *transforming under a full moon to play around his room at Lotus Pier, talismans blocking the windows from prying eyes.*

It was possible that Lan Wangji was only allowing Wei Wuxian to show his features until his tails healed, however, and worry pricked under his skin.

“It’s not against their rules,” Wei Wuxian eventually said, and Jiang Cheng didn’t push him for more. Instead, Jiang Cheng looked contemplative, the emotion a rare one on his brother’s face.

“…You won’t be confined to your rooms once you’re healed?” Jiang Cheng hesitantly asked.

“I told you that was a misunderstanding,” Wei Wuxian sighed. “I’ll be free to even leave the palace if I want, provided I take guards.”

“What about attending meetings?”

Wei Wuxian frowned, glancing at Jiang Cheng. His brother’s lips were pursed as he stared into the courtyard.

“Lan Zhan said I could go to them once I’ve healed. Why?” Wei Wuxian asked, concerned that he had missed something important. His worry grew as the silence stretched and Jiang

Cheng agitatedly flicked his tail.

“There’s a war reparations meeting next week with the ambassadors from the main sects,” Jiang Cheng said. “We’re supposed to discuss the remaining war camps.”

Wei Wuxian stiffened, his breath catching in his throat.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had been trying for months to gather information on the remaining camps without arousing suspicion. Before the wedding they had gone on night hunts near the borders of Jinlintai, using the hunts as an excuse to sneak into Jin territory and investigate.

What they had found out had been minimal, however, as most people in the towns they visited knew little more than gossip. Some said the camps didn’t exist, and that the Jin had executed the remaining Wen. Others insisted they were real, but were made invisible by barriers to keep the Wen from escaping.

And yet others whispered that the Jin cultivators had found a way to harness the Wen’s spirit powers, hoarding it for themselves and torturing the Wen until their wailing could be heard from nearby towns.

“I'll convince Lan Zhan I’m well enough to go,” Wei Wuxian said as he forced himself to reign in his growing anger. Jiang Cheng tersely nodded, swiveling an ear toward Wei Wuxian.

“Good. Because I don’t know how we’d manage sneaking—"

A sudden cry interrupted Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng jumped to his feet, Wei Wuxian following behind as they looked for the source of the cry in the courtyard. At first, Wei Wuxian couldn’t see anything wrong.

Mo Xuanyu was hovering beside A-Yuan, his hands outstretched and shaking. His tail was curled around his legs in distress, and A-Yuan merely stared at him before lifting his robes and looking down at himself.

It was then that Wei Wuxian saw blood blooming from A-Yuan’s knees, and he let out a relieved sigh as he strode over to A-Yuan and Mo Xuanyu.

“Baba, I hurt my knees,” A-Yuan said with a pout, holding his robes higher as blood trickled down his legs. He puffed his cheeks, looking entirely put-out about the entire situation, and Wei Wuxian couldn’t stop himself from pinching A-Yuan’s cheeks with a soft coo.

“That you did, little one,” Wei Wuxian laughed as he kneeled before A-Yuan to assess the cuts. They didn’t look deep, and shouldn’t take long to clean once Wei Wuxian tied A-Yuan’s robes out of the way.

Wei Wuxian had started undoing A-Yuan’s belt when A-Yuan patted his face to get his attention before pointing at Mo Xuanyu. Wei Wuxian hummed, looked over his shoulder, and paused when he realized Mo Xuanyu was crying.

On his knees.

“I didn’t mean to hurt the young master!” Mo Xuanyu sobbed before pressing his head to the ground, ears pressed flat against his head. Jiang Cheng stood beside him; tail twitching as he tried pulling Mo Xuanyu to his feet.

“What are you doing? A-Yuan probably just tripped. It happens all the time,” Jiang Cheng said, managing to lift Mo Xuanyu’s head from the ground. Mo Xuanyu shook his head, however, crying harder as he shied away from Jiang Cheng’s touch.

Concerned, Wei Wuxian quickly tied up A-Yuan’s robes and passed him to Jiang Cheng. Jiang Cheng hissed and scrambled to keep A-Yuan’s bloody knees from touching his robes, glaring at Wei Wuxian as he balanced A-Yuan in his arms.

Wei Wuxian then knelt and reached for Mo Xuanyu. “Mo Xuanyu, what are you crying for?” Wei Wuxian asked, keeping his tone light. “It’s nothing that a few bandages can’t fix.”

Mo Xuanyu flinched when Wei Wuxian touched him, sinking into himself and pressing his head back to the ground, tail curled around himself as he started shaking.

“I didn’t hurt him,” Mo Xuanyu insisted, his breath hitching. Unable to handle the tears, Wei Wuxian chittered at Mo Xuanyu then lifted his wrist to Mo Xuanyu’s nose. The sudden surge of Wei Wuxian’s scent startled Mo Xuanyu from his crying, and he looked up with a lost expression.

“I didn’t hurt him,” Mo Xuanyu repeated, his eyes red and face stained with tears. Wei Wuxian nodded, then gently patted Mo Xuanyu’s head a few times.

“I am aware,” Wei Wuxian reassured him, then pulled a shaky Mo Xuanyu to his feet. “See? A-Yuan will be fine after a bath and some bandages.”

“Mn!” A-Yuan quickly agreed. Mo Xuanyu sniffled but nodded, tail curled around his knees.

“Now why don't we get you both inside?” Wei Wuxian said then shooed everyone inside. Mo Xuanyu went willingly, if not in a dejected manner, while Jiang Cheng bristled, insisting that *he* didn’t need to be led around.

A-Yuan giggled the entire way inside, then called to Lan Wangji from Jiang Cheng’s arms, waving and pointing at his knees. “Rich-gege, look!”

Wei Wuxian had to bite his tongue to not laugh when Lan Wangji glanced at them and immediately froze upon seeing A-Yuan’s injuries.

Mo Xuanyu squeaked in fear and darted behind Wei Wuxian, his hands digging into the back of Wei Wuxian’s robes.

“Aiya, enough of that Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian gently said. “A-Yuan just tripped during a game.”

Lan Wangji's intense expression didn't change, and Wei Wuxian felt Mo Xuanyu's face press into his back. *Enough.*

"Xuanyu, why don't you call for a bath for A-Yuan, then go take one yourself?" Wei Wuxian suggested. "We'll be able to take care of A-Yuan from here," he added, looking over his shoulder. Mo Xuanyu stiffly nodded into his back then let go, murmuring another apology before he all but fled from the room.

Lan Wangji had joined them while Wei Wuxian spoke, and the silence that followed Mo Xuanyu's departure was deafening.

And then Jiang Cheng loudly scoffed.

"What the fuck was that?" Jiang Cheng asked. Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes in clear disapproval while A-Yuan gasped.

"Rich-gege, Jiujiu said a bad word!"

"Mn," Lan Wangji replied. "He will receive punishment."

"What the hell? I'm not a Lan disciple!" Jiang Cheng insisted, only to have Lan Wangji blink slowly in response.

"The punishment will be doubled."

Jiang Cheng snarled and Wei Wuxian quickly moved between him and Lan Wangji, pushing Jiang Cheng back with a strained laugh.

"I'm sure Lan Zhan is just messing with you, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian argued and Lan Wangji furrowed his brow.

A-Yuan looked particularly serious as he reached up, patted Jiang Cheng's face, and confirmed that *the punishment will be doubled* in something resembling Lan Wangji's tone.

Wei Wuxian chittered at the adorable sight, rushing forward to scoop A-Yuan into his arms and spinning him around. "Lan Zhan, he sounds like you!" Wei Wuxian laughed while Jiang Cheng muttered several colorful phrases under his breath.

Thankfully Lan Wangji didn't seem to hear Jiang Cheng, and he simply hummed at Wei Wuxian before glancing at his robes, the tip of his tail twitching.

"Wei Ying, your robes."

Wei Wuxian paused mid-spin and looked down at himself. He had forgotten about A-Yuan's still-bloody knees, and there were now several smears of red staining the soft blue of Wei Wuxian's outer robes.

Wei Wuxian almost chuckled before he remembered that the robes were Lan Wangji's, and that he had likely ruined them with the blood. He stilled and took a step back from Lan Wangji, scrambling to apologize.

Lan Wangji's frown grew, and he reached out and tugged on Wei Wuxian's sleeve.

"It is no issue," Lan Wangji said, holding Wei Wuxian's gaze until Wei Wuxian relaxed. From beside them, Jiang Cheng watched with a glower.

"I don't want to know what this—" Jiang Cheng gestured between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian, "—is about. But what I do want to know is whether you're going to address the fact that your servant collapsed because A-Yuan skinned his knees."

Wei Wuxian grimaced, unsure how to explain the situation. Not that Wei Wuxian understood it much himself. Mo Xuanyu's fear likely had to do with whatever he had been doing while with the Jin, but Wei Wuxian hadn't wanted to pry about what had happened to the teen.

"Mo Xuanyu's situation is…unique," Lan Wangji hesitantly said, the first to break the silence.

"Unique? He acted like we were going to hurt him," Jiang Cheng replied.

Lan Wangji pursed his lips, looking away. "I do not know the full extent of the issue, and it is not my place to speak on it."

"Does anyone in the palace know?" Wei Wuxian asked, cutting in.

"Xiongzhang is aware."

"Really?" Wei Wuxian questioned, surprised. Jiang Cheng was making a similarly baffled expression.

"Mn. It was him who brought Mo Xuanyu to the palace," Lan Wangji explained.

Wei Wuxian turned the information over in his mind with a frown. It seemed off that the emperor would personally bring in a young servant from Jinlintai, but before Wei Wuxian could question Lan Wangji further A-Yuan spoke up.

"Baba, my legs are getting sticky," he complained as he poked at the blood drying on his knees. Wei Wuxian sighed, putting his questions about Mo Xuanyu aside and hiking A-Yuan higher in his arms.

"So we're just going to leave it at that?" Jiang Cheng asked, ears twitching in annoyance.

"For now," Wei Wuxian replied. "I'll see what I can learn from Mo Xuanyu later."

Jiang Cheng huffed, glaring at Lan Wangji. "Of course you will, because we're not going to get any answers from Hanguang-jun, are we?"

Lan Wangji blankly stared at Jiang Cheng until he threw his hands up and stormed toward the door.

"Whatever! Wei Wuxian, get A-Yuan cleaned up, will you?" Jiang Cheng said. "Some of us have work to do," he added before pointing a finger at Wei Wuxian. "And I'm going to come

back to steal my nephew for dinner."

Wei Wuxian chuckled and told Jiang Cheng not to worry, then shooed him from the room as A-Yuan cheered about spending more time with his Jiujiu.

Lan Wangji looked particularly displeased as Jiang Cheng left, and so Wei Wuxian walked to his side with a grin and foisted A-Yuan into his arms. Lan Wangji startled but held onto A-Yuan, and Wei Wuxian laughed at the petulant glare Lan Wangji sent him as he carefully held A-Yuan away from his chest so he didn't get blood on his robes.

"It's just a little blood, Lan Zhan. It can't hurt you!"

"Wei *Ying,"* Lan Wangji huffed, and A-Yuan mirrored his expression. It was abruptly too much for Wei Wuxian to handle and he purred, curling himself over A-Yuan and affectionately nipping his ears.

Distracted by nuzzling A-Yuan, it took Wei Wuxian several seconds to realize how close he was to Lan Wangji.

Close enough that when Wei Wuxian lifted his head their noses almost brushed. Wei Wuxian held his breath, abruptly unable to look away from Lan Wangji's eyes when he realized the darker flecks of gold in them were scattered throughout like stars in the sky.

Lan Wangji met his gaze then quickly looked away. Wei Wuxian took in his full expression, his smile growing as he reached up and ran a hand over one of Lan Wangji's bright red ears. Lan Wangji stiffened at the touch, looking pathetically betrayed as his gaze snapped to meet Wei Wuxian's.

Cute.

Wei Wuxian leaned closer; a moth drawn to a flame with the desire to see how Lan Wangji would react. To see whether he'd turn as red as a young maiden or instead push back, *his cheeks flushing as he forced Wei Wuxian to—*

"Baba, you're smushing me!"

A-Yuan's protest washed over Wei Wuxian and he quickly stepped back and took A-Yuan with him, face flushing as he put space between himself and Lan Wangji. *What had he been thinking?*

Lan Wangji clenched his hands into his robes, tension radiating from him as he stared at the floor, his ears still bright red.

"Sorry, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian offered. "I can't help but bully you when you make that face," he continued before he could stop himself. Wei Wuxian flinched when Lan Wangji sent him an enraged glare, but before he could apologize—*he had teased the crown prince, shit—* Lan Wangji huffed and left the room.

Baffled, Wei Wuxian stared at the door for a few moments and then let his legs give out. He sank inelegantly to the floor and buried his face in A-Yuan's hair. For some reason his heart

was racing; Lan Wangji's flustered expression looping through his mind.

A-Yuan struggled for freedom while Wei Wuxian whined into his hair and tried to ignore how cute his husband had looked.

By the time Lan Wangji returned with servants carrying a small bath of steaming water, Wei Wuxian was sprawled face-down on the floor, lamenting to a disinterested A-Yuan about how life wasn't fair to give him such a pretty husband.

Wei Wuxian lifted his head when he heard the servants set the tub down, and he pouted as the servants shot him scandalized looks and muffed their laughter behind their sleeves.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian whined, rolling over. He yelped when he rolled onto his tails, scrambling to his feet with a sharp hiss. The servants tittered louder, and then Lan Wangji stiffly sent them away before turning toward Wei Wuxian with an unimpressed look.

"Be careful," he intoned, then scooped A-Yuan from the floor and carried him over to the bath. "You must bathe before we may treat your wounds."

A-Yuan nodded as Lan Wangji set him beside the bath, then stared when Lan Wangji made no further move to help. Lan Wangji stared back, his tail shifting over the floor. A-Yuan looked down at himself, then pouted at Lan Wangji and tugged on his robes.

"I do not understand," Lan Wangji eventually said, and Wei Wuxian had to cover his mouth to stifle his laughter. A-Yuan's pout grew and he puffed up his cheeks, tugging harder on Lan Wangji's sleeves.

"Baba always helps."

The panicked expression Lan Wangji made had Wei Wuxian howling, and he rolled around on the floor some more until the pain in his tails and A-Yuan's protests pulled him back to his feet.

He quickly knelt beside them, ruffling A-Yuan's hair with a grin. "This kit is still young enough that he needs help, isn't he?" Wei Wuxian teased.

A-Yuan huffed and hastily tried pulling off his robes. He couldn't quite undo his belt however, and he quickly yanked on Wei Wuxian's sleeves until Wei Wuxian started helping.

Lan Wangji knelt primly beside the bath as Wei Wuxian wrestled A-Yuan from his robes and into the water. A-Yuan whined when his knees hit the water, and Wei Wuxian quickly soothed him, running his hands through his hair and over his ears until A-yuan calmed enough to enjoy the bath.

"May I help?" Lan Wangji asked, and Wei Wuxian paused as he reached for the soap and a washing cloth.

"Eh? I can't promise you won't get dirty, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said. "But as long as A-Yuan doesn't mind, you can help."

“Rich-gege can help!” A-Yuan insisted, slapping his hands against the water and splashing both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian laughed and tied his sleeves back as Lan Wangji frowned.

“I warned you, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said, and then handed Lan Wangji the hair soap and told A-Yuan to behave.

With two sets of hands, A-Yuan was scrubbed clean before the water grew cold. Lan Wangji had taken to the task of washing A-Yuan’s hair with the most serious expression, his hands surprisingly gentle as he worked. He insisted that Wei Wuxian wash A-Yuan’s ears and tail however, his ears turning a light pink when Wei Wuxian teased him about it.

“Only family may do so,” Lan Wangji had offered as an explanation, and then looked entirely baffled when A-Yuan slapped a wet hand on his shoulder and asked whether Lan Wangji had lied when he had said that he and A-Yuan were family.

Wei Wuxian had paused in cleaning A-Yuan’s knees, his thoughts stuttering because *when had Lan Zhan told A-Yuan they were family?* Not that it wasn’t technically true, but it was one thing to live amicably for the sake of an arranged marriage and quite another to claim they shared a close bond.

“It is against the rules to lie,” A-Yuan had added, and then Lan Wangji had unfrozen, his eyes dropping as he lathered more soap onto A-Yuan’s head and scrubbed his ears.

“Mn. This one apologizes for misspeaking,” Lan Wangji had said. “A-Yuan is family.”

Wei Wuxian hadn’t stopped grinning until they finished the bath, scooped A-Yuan from the water, and bundled him into a towel.

Lan Wangji then stepped behind a screen to change out of his wet robes while Wei Wuxian dried A-Yuan off and bandaged his knees.

A-Yuan was falling asleep after Wei Wuxian helped him into a clean set of robes. He kept listing to the side where he stood, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

“He may sleep on my bed,” Lan Wangji offered and Wei Wuxian startled, not realizing he had returned. “We may watch him while we work.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Wei Wuxian asked as he picked A-Yuan up.

“I do not.”

A-Yuan protested as soon as Wei Wuxian tucked him into Lan Wangji’s bed, sleepily insisting that it smelled wrong before shoving the blankets away. Wei Wuxian sighed then untied his dirty outer robes and let them fall to the floor. He pulled off his blood-free middle layer then tucked it around A-Yuan.

A-Yuan quickly quieted, pulling the robes closer before falling asleep.

When Wei Wuxian turned around, it was to see Lan Wangji watching him. Lan Wangji hastily looked away, his ears red, and Wei Wuxian couldn't stop himself from teasing Lan Wangji about liking his husband in his inner robes until they settled at his low table and divided the day's paperwork.

Long after they had finished reviewing the missives and proposals, Jiang Cheng had returned to take A-Yuan away for dinner while Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian ate their own food. It was only then that Wei Wuxian realized that he had forgotten to ask Lan Wangji if he could attend the war reparations meeting.

"Lan Zhan, would it be alright if I—"

"No talking during meals," Lan Wangji said, cutting him off before delicately taking a bite of food.

Wei Wuxian pouted and set his bowl aside.

"There. I'm not eating now, am I?" Wei Wuxian asked, smirking when Lan Wangji threw him a displeased look. Wei Wuxian had thought he had won when Lan Wangji reached into his sleeves and pulled of a small jar and opened the lid.

"If Wei Ying wants to talk, he should finish his food."

A familiar scent of spices flooded Wei Wuxian's mouth and he snatched the jar from Lan Wangji's hands. Lan Wangji had kept providing spices for Wei Wuxian's meals, but the jars were clearly from Caiyi and lacked the usual punch that Wei Wuxian craved.

This jar, however, smelled of Lotus Pier and home and Wei Wuxian doused his food and was shoveling it down within seconds.

When he thought to pause and thank Lan Wangji, he lifted his gaze to see Lan Wangji's lips pulled into a soft smile. Wei Wuxian stilled, thrown by how gentle his husband looked as he finished his meal.

"Lan Zhan…" Wei Wuxian trailed off as Lan Wangji lifted his gaze, his smile quickly fading. Wei Wuxian swallowed around the sudden tightness in his throat and awkwardly laughed, gesturing to his empty bowl.

"I've finished, alright?"

Lan Wangji hummed, finished his own food, then nodded. "What does Wei Ying need?"

"Nothing, really. But I heard there's going to be a war reparations meeting new week," Wei Wuxian said, trying to keep his voice level. "I wanted to know if I'd be allowed to attend."

Lan Wangji tipped his head, staying silent long enough that Wei Wuxian began squirming in his seat.

"As long as Liu Qing says Wei Ying is healed enough, he may attend," Lan Wangji said. "He does not need to otherwise ask for permission."

“I promise I’m already healed enough, there’s no need to bother her,” Wei Wuxian tried. Lan Wangji took a sip of tea, his tail lazily flicking back and forth.

“Wei Ying must have her approval.”

Wei Wuxian groaned but didn’t protest further, resigning himself to relying on Wen Qing’s approval and praying that she didn’t force him to miss the meeting.

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Thankfully, Wen Qing cleared Wei Wuxian to attend any meetings within the week.

Wei Wuxian had been on his best behavior, forcing Jiang Cheng and Mo Xuanyu to chase A-Yuan around while he lamented that he couldn’t do it himself. Lan Wangji had given him a stern look every time Wei Wuxian interrupted their work to yell into the courtyard, and Wei Wuxian would grin and lay himself over their paperwork until Lan Wangji reprimanded him.

Lan Wangji hadn’t kicked him from their rooms, however, and Wei Wuxian easily fell into a steady routine until the day of the meeting arrived.

Mo Xuanyu helped Wei Wuxian get ready the day of the meeting, insisting that he needed to look his best for his first official one. Wei Wuxian had protested until Lan Wangji had agreed with Mo Xuanyu and then handed Mo Xuanyu a few delicate hairpins for Wei Wuxian’s hair.

Mo Xuanyu finished tying up Wei Wuxian’s hair into a complicated knot of braids then slipped in the hairpins before murmuring that he was finished.

Combined with yet another one of Lan Wangji’s old light blue outer robes, Wei Wuxian was surprised by how regal he looked when he assessed himself in a bronze mirror.

“Is Wei Ying ready?”

“As much as I’ll ever be,” Wei Wuxian chuckled as he turned and walked over to Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji stared then tipped his head, slowly meeting Wei Wuxian’s gaze.

“I am warning you,” Lan Wangji offered and Wei Wuxian paused, a thin thread of worry sinking through him. *He hadn’t done anything wrong, had he?*

“Wei Ying looks handsome.”

Wei Wuxian spluttered as warmth rushed to his face. “You can’t just—”

“I can. I have warned you,” Lan Wangji replied, and Wei Wuxian flushed harder when he realized what Lan Wangji was referring to. Behind them, Mo Xuanyu softly chuckled and Wei Wuxian whipped his head around.

“This is your fault!” Wei Wuxian accused. Mo Xuanyu merely blushed and ducked his head, covering his face with a sleeve.

“T-This one thanks you for saying he did a good job.”

Unable to scold Mo Xuanyu when he was making that expression, Wei Wuxian huffed and strode past Lan Wangji into the hall.

Lan Wangji reached him before he left the hallway, and Wei Wuxian forced himself to slow and wait for him, willing the heat in his cheeks away. He couldn't show up to a war meeting looking like a blushing maiden, after all.

Thinking about the meeting quickly doused his embarrassment, and he walked with Lan Wangji to the end of the hallway before abruptly stopping when the next hall opened up.

Because Wei Wuxian wasn't in the safety of their rooms anymore and he remembered that *his features were still visible.*

There were servants and cultivators going about their usual business in the main halls, walking in groups while carrying scrolls or laundry, their gentle voices lost in the bustle.

Lan Wangji walked into the main area, then paused and turned back to Wei Wuxian, his brow minutely furrowed.

"Wei Ying?"

A group of servants looked at them when they heard Lan Wangji's voice, their eyes slipping from the crown prince to Wei Wuxian.

His features were still showing.

Wei Wuxian quickly backed away and hid his ears. He tried the same with his tails, but they stubbornly stayed visible. He had only recently been able to move them again, and apparently his control didn't extend to hiding them from view.

And if he couldn't hide them here, he couldn't hide them during the meeting, and the thought of stepping into a war meeting where everyone could see them made Wei Wuxian's skin crawl and the whip marks on his back ache.

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji repeated, and Wei Wuxian jerked backward when he realized Lan Wangji was standing in front of him with a worried expression. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!" Wei Wuxian insisted, waving a hand. Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes and stepped closer.

"Do not lie," Lan Wangji said as he shifted to block Wei Wuxian's view of the way ahead. He glanced at where Wei Wuxian's ears had been, then stepped further into Wei Wuxian's space, standing far too close for Wei Wuxian to form a coherent lie.

And then Lan Wangji suddenly rumbled, the low noise filling the space between them.

"Why does Wei Ying feel threatened?" Lan Wangji asked and Wei Wuxian jerked his gaze to Lan Wangji's in surprise. *How did he—?*

“I can’t hide my tails,” Wei Wuxian whispered, hating that he wasn’t strong enough to hide them. He had gotten spoiled; lazing about their rooms with a freedom he had never had before.

The furrow between Lan Wangji’s brow grew.

“Mn, they are visible.”

“Exactly, Lan Zhan. They’re *visible,”* Wei Wuxian stressed. Lan Wangji pursed his lips, his stare growing more intense.

“There is no need to hide them in the palace,” Lan Wangji said. “It is not against the rules.”

Wei Wuxian swallowed the growing tension wrapping around his throat, looking away as he scrambled to explain to Lan Wangji why he couldn’t. Because it wasn’t right; a *huli jing* running around as if he wasn’t one of the last left, as if his tails alone didn’t mark him as the type of spirit that created ruin throughout the centuries.

As if the Wen hadn’t killed them all for their crimes.

Wei Wuxian jolted from his thoughts when he heard Lan Wangji rumble and something soft dropped over him. Startled, he realized that Lan Wangji had removed his outer robes and draped them over Wei Wuxian's shoulders.

“Wei Ying may wear it,” Lan Wangji offered as he maneuvered Wei Wuxian’s arms through the sleeves. “It will hide Wei Ying’s tails.” And then Lan Wangji’s hands moved to Wei Wuxian’s belt, his fingers deftly picking apart the knot.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian weakly called, face steaming as a sharp heat pooled in his stomach when he realized that *his husband was undressing him in public.*

Lan Wangji paused, then seemed to realize what he was doing and his ears turned a deep red and he backed away, tucking his hands into his sleeves.

Wei Wuxian awkwardly laughed as he finished untying his belt before retying it over the extra layer of robes. “It’s alright, Lan Zhan,” he shakily said, his fingers fumbling slightly. Lan Wangji’s robe was surprisingly soft and lightweight enough that it didn’t hurt Wei Wuxian’s tails.

It was slightly cold to the touch, however, and Wei Wuxian had to resist the urge to bury his nose in the collar and breathe in Lan Wangji’s scent.

Once the robe was secure, Wei Wuxian followed Lan Wangji without further hesitation throughout the palace, although Lan Wangji kept sending Wei Wuxian small glances as they went.

They ended up being the last ones to arrive to the war meeting.

When they stepped into the room, everyone turned and stared at Wei Wuxian with varying looks of anger or surprise. Wei Wuxian recognized some of the ambassadors from the last

cultivation conference, but their names hadn't stuck around for Wei Wuxian to recall.

The Nie delegates seemed to recover first, and their expressions turned carefully neutral as they bowed with the appropriate greeting. Wei Wuxian was relieved to spot his brother standing across the room, leaning over a large map spread out on a table alongside one of the Nie ambassadors, and Jiang Cheng looked up when the Nie bowed.

Jiang Cheng's face twisted when he saw what Wei Wuxian was wearing, and he lashed his tail before begrudgingly sending a greeting his way.

One of the Jin delegates openly scoffed, glaring at Wei Wuxian.

"What is *he* doing here?" The glaring Jin asked, crossing his arms as the other Jin shifted nervously behind him. Wei Wuxian tried to remember who the speaking Jin was and failed; his voice sounded familiar but his face wasn't, and aside from wearing a slightly nicer set of robes, there was nothing about him that stood out.

Jiang Cheng hissed from across the table. "He's here as part of the Lan representatives, obviously. Or have you forgotten he married the crown prince?"

Wei Wuxian awkwardly chuckled and stepped forward, trying to wave away the growing tension.

"It's alright, Jiang Cheng. It isn't the Jin representative's fault if he's new and doesn't know who I am," he said, keeping a smile as he bowed toward the Jin in question. "This one is Wei Wuxian, general to the Jiang during the war and spouse to the crown prince."

Wei Wuxian helpfully didn't mention his status as a *huli jing*, knowing that the other delegates were likely only tolerating his presence because they couldn't see his features.

The Jin delegate stared, his mouth hanging open before his face turned red.

"I've been the head Jin ambassador for the last three years!" He shouted, stamping his foot in anger. The Jin behind him stepped away and hid behind the Nie, who were watching with wide eyes.

"Oh, then you must be new to these types of meetings?" Wei Wuxian asked, his tails twitching in delight when his words only further angered the Jin, who gasped and shook his fist at Wei Wuxian.

"You—!" He accused. "I was there at the last cultivation conference. How can I not know who you are, you despicable *huli jing—"*

"That is enough," Lan Wangji said, stepping beside Wei Wuxian as he glared at the Jin. The Jin smartly closed his mouth and backed off, although his fists were still shaking at his side and he refused to look at Wei Wuxian.

Lan Wangji turned to the other ambassadors, and when none had anything else to add Lan Wangji curtly nodded and stepped up to the table with the map and called for the meeting to start.

Wei Wuxian spent most of the meeting impatiently waiting for them to bring up the remaining war camps.

Jiang Cheng had settled beside Wei Wuxian on one side, with Lan Wangji on the other, and it was deeply satisfying when they supported him whenever he pointed out an issue with what an ambassador was proposing.

For instance, one of the Nie proposed their sect was willing to take control over the Wen's prior land and would provide protection to those in their new borders. Wei Wuxian had then slyly asked whether Nie Mingjue had also offered to cleanse the lingering resentful energy, and the Nie delegate quickly retracted their proposal.

Picking apart the proposals and highlighting what they lacked was satisfying, familiar in the way that maneuvering troops around a battlefield was for Wei Wuxian, and he shivered in delight each time he tore apart a proposal and Lan Wangji made an approving hum and didn't stop him.

Lan Wangji would only glare at the ambassador disagreeing with Wei Wuxian until they caved and bowed, asking for forgiveness for their impudence before putting forth 'corrected' proposals that should have been offered from the start.

It wasn't until near the end of the meeting when the Jin—the same one that had yelled at Wei Wuxian before, and who Wei Wuxian still couldn't remember his name—brought up the war camps by laying out a proposal for receiving additional support from the palace to continue feeding the prisoners.

"Surely Lanling Jin have enough stores to feed the prisoners themselves?" Xiao Zhanshi, one of the Nie ambassadors, asked. Wei Wuxian only remembered his name because it matched his slight stature; he stood almost a full head shorter than the other Nie.

The Jin scoffed and shook his head, pulling out a scroll covered in what appeared to be tallies for rice and grain stores. "Even our vast wealth cannot contend with the Wen's greed," he lamented. "And our reports suggest there may be a drought during the next growing season, which means we must save our current stores for our own people."

Xiao Zhanshi and others throughout the room nodded in understanding. A possible drought could destroy a sect's reserves quickly, and it made sense to ask for more to prevent the common people from starving.

Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, however, were livid.

"You expect us to believe that?" Jiang Cheng snarled and slammed a fist onto the table, sending a few scrolls flying. Wei Wuxian similarly bristled, biting back the urge to bare his teeth.

"We have the calculations here to prove that we need more rice if we plan to—"

"More rice?" Wei Wuxian sharply cut the Jin off this time, anger coursing through him until he felt his powers sparking on his hands, temping to ruin this man with the most horrifying

illusions Wei Wuxian knew.

“For what?” Wei Wuxian continued before the Jin could retaliate. *“There are no prisoners left in your camps.”*

There was a breath of silence, and then the room descended into chaos.

The Jin immediately denied Wei Wuxian’s claims, clustering around their head ambassador as they shouted at Wei Wuxian. Jiang Cheng spat their accusations back at them, reaching for the sword that wasn’t at his side due to palace regulations and then extended his claws instead.

“He’s nothing more than a *huli jing,* you can’t trust his words!” The head Jin yelled as Jiang Cheng advanced around the table toward him. The Nie looked as confused as the delegates from the smaller sects, and they wisely made no move to help the Jin, despite their whispers filling the room.

Seeing that Jiang Cheng wasn’t stopping, the Jin started backing away in fear then turned to beseech Lan Wangji.

“You Highness! Surely you will stop him?”

“Jiang Wanyin, that is enough,” Lan Wangji said as he stepped between Jiang Cheng and the Jin.

“I will not stand down,” Jiang Cheng snapped. “Not when the Jin continue to reap benefits from the slaughter of civilians.”

“That’s absurd! You can’t expect the crown prince to believe someone who knows nothing of which they speak?” The Jin yelled back, ignoring Lan Wangji’s order. “We all know how little you contributed to the war; a general in name only while your martial brother fought your battles for you!”

Jiang Cheng had darted around Lan Wangji and launched himself at the Jin before he could finish speaking. They both crashed to the floor in a flurry of flailing limbs and robes, and several people rushed forward to try and pry them apart.

Wei Wuxian felt like he had stepped outside himself as he watched Jiang Cheng trade vicious blows back and forth with the Jin ambassador. Wei Wuxian’s anger had engulfed him, swimming with memories he couldn’t stop as *he wandered through Yiling in the snow, kicking his feet and laughing when a few children ran after the scattered piles.*

Jiang Cheng scolded him, saying he wasn’t a kid anymore, but Wei Wuxian only laughed harder. They had fought in and won a war, why shouldn’t they enjoy the snow after a successful night hunt? His brother scowled and crossed his arms but didn’t protest any further, at least not until Wei Wuxian scooped up some snow and dumped it down the back of his robes.

Jiang Cheng screeched then chased Wei Wuxian through the streets until they fell panting into the snow outside a teahouse, their breath clouding the air as one of the shopkeepers joked that they'd need something to eat after all that running.

They had laughed breathlessly, Wei Wuxian leaning into the simple feeling of joy radiating through him when a thin voice called his name.

Wei Wuxian stood, turning to spot a ragged figure leaning against the teahouse in an alley. They called his name again, and despite Jiang Cheng's protests, Wei Wuxian stepped forward then realized it was a woman calling his name.

She wore threadbare robes torn at the edges, her feet bare and bloody from walking in the snow. She was thinner than a woman her size should be, and when she lowered the hood covering her head fear gripped Wei Wuxian's chest.

"Please, you have to help me," Wen Qing begged, staggering forward until she fell at Wei Wuxian's feet.

"How does she know your name?" Jiang Cheng asked, eyes widening when he saw the blood red feathers in her hair.

"It doesn't matter," Wei Wuxian replied. "Wen Qing, tell me what's happened."

Wen Qing had relayed a story of violence and death at the hands of the Jin cultivators overseeing the war camps, and any reservations Jiang Cheng may have had about helping a phoenix were gone by the time she finished and he insisted he was coming with them.

Wei Wuxian had held Wen Qing on his sword, and then they took off from Yiling, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian flying side by side as Wen Qing told them where to go.

By the time they arrived at the war camp, the sun was starting to set and there weren't any cultivators in sight.

Wen Qing said they had left once everyone was supposed to be dead, and she had only survived by burying herself under two corpses.

Jiang Cheng paled at her words, trading a worried look with Wei Wuxian before they followed her into the camp.

The smell of death was thick in the camp, and Wei Wuxian swallowed bile as he scanned the corpses strewn around. They were thick with flies and rot, some corpses much worse than others. Jiang Cheng asked Wen Qing what her brother looked like, then the three of them examined the corpses, looking for signs of life and a brother they didn't find.

Wen Qing grew more and more desperate as they searched the main compound and found no sign of her brother. She insisted he had to be in the main compound, because if he wasn't it meant that the cultivators had taken him to the shooting grounds, where the majority of those in the camp met their end.

They searched and searched, and after a shichen of finding nothing Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had reluctantly asked Wen Qing to lead them to the shooting grounds.

The shooting grounds were worse than Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had expected. The bodies here were piled into stacks, most naked and exposed to the elements as carrion birds picked them apart, heedless of the arrows protruding from their skin.

Wen Qing waded into the horror without pause. Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian watched as she searched, unable to step into the hell that was the remnants of the Wen. They could do nothing more than clench their hands and hope that Wen Qing may have led them to the wrong camp, that surely her brother hadn't been here, that surely he might still be alive.

And then Wen Qing had stopped dead in the middle of the field.

She collapsed to the ground over a body that Wei Wuxian recognized as her brother's, then pulled his body into her arms.

He wasn't moving.

Wen Qing dug her fingers into his bloody robes and screamed.

The sound struck Wei Wuxian like a blade through his chest and he staggered, holding onto Jiang Cheng as Wen Qing's screams turned into heart-wrenching sobs. Wen Qing then clutched her chest, turning to the side as she dry-heaved what little was left in her stomach.

Jiang Cheng stood frozen beside Wei Wuxian, face pale as they both scanned the field for something, for anything, that might still be alive.

But nothing moved. No one called for help.

And so they were left in the dying light of the day, surrounded by corpses and death while Wen Qing screamed against the pain of it all.

It wasn't until Wen Qing's screams had turned into broken sobs that Wei Wuxian heard it.

Someone was crying.

It was faint, but there, and Wei Wuxian jerked into motion, scrambling towards the edge of the shooting grounds where a forest rose to surround the camp. He followed the crying into the forest until he came to a hollowed-out tree.

A child was curled inside, fevered and pale and sobbing incoherently. They looked startingly like a kit, and for a moment Wei Wuxian was waiting for his mama and baba to return, shaking and cold because they said they'd only be gone for a day—

Wei Wuxian shoved his thoughts aside and scooped the child from the tree, tucking them against his chest. He crooned softly as he pulled his outer robes around the child in a makeshift sling. The child was burning up, his breathing shaky and hot, and Wei Wuxian smoothed a hand over the child's ears as he rushed back to the others.

Wei Wuxian rejoined Jiang Cheng, who hadn't yet moved, his eyes locked on the crumpled form of Wen Qing. Jiang Cheng snapped his gaze to Wei Wuxian as soon as he returned, however, his face falling open in shock when he saw the child.

"Who is that?"

Wei Wuxian hesitated, curling his arms tighter around the child as he scrambled for a response. He couldn't think of a good reason for why the child was in the camp, or who he might be, but if he had been in the same camp as Wen Qing, there was a high chance that he was related to her in some way.

Jiang Cheng wouldn't care the child was a Wen, but horror clawed at Wei Wuxian at the thought of trying to bring such a child into Lotus Pier, even if just to receive medical care.

Wei Wuxian brushed a hand over the child's ears once more and then pulled out the only excuse he could think of, praying that the child's parents wouldn't turn into resentful spirits and haunt him from the grave for his audacity.

"He's my son."

Chapter End Notes

Content warnings: minor character death, minor gore

I'm sorryI'msorryI'msorryI'msorryI'msorry.

Everyone kept asking about Wen Ning and where A-Yuan came from and I've had to sit in a corner crying about it by myself because I couldn't say anything without ruining some major plot points. ~~Although to be fair, ya'll haven't questioned much about why WQ and A-Yuan were at lotus pier in the first place smh.~~

Tbh, despite the pain this chapter has one of my favorite lines in it, kudos if you can guess which one.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> That's it, I give up.
>
> Each chapter has turned into a beast, and my patience for betaing has gone in the toilet because I'm too excited to post and show you all what's next. Pour one out for this poor author and her inability to post before thoroughly reviewing for errors. Hopefully there are no blatant ones. TuT
>
> See end of chapter for content warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lan Wangji wasn’t sure how the meeting descended into chaos.

One moment he was listening to the Jin delegation bring up issues with feeding prisoners in the war camps, and then next Jiang Wanyin had *tackled Jin Zixun to the floor.*

Others near the pair had been quick to try breaking them apart, but before Lan Wangji could intervene he had been distracted by Wei Wuxian.

Who had stood frozen with his head bowed, hands visibly shaking where they were clenched at his side. Lan Wangji had turned to him, concerned that Wei Wuxian had been sent spiraling into memories of the war.

But Wei Wuxian hadn’t smelled of fear.

Instead, he had smelled of *rage.*

A distressed rumble threatened to fall from Lan Wangji’s lips as he glanced between the fighting men and his husband. Without their swords, Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun were squabbling like children, biting and kicking one another to the point where Jin Zixun’s features had slipped out.

Jiang Wanyin had clawed several lines across Jin Zixun’s chest, and both their clothes were torn and in a state of disarray. The other Jin ambassadors seemed to have given up on pulling the two apart, and there were no other Jiang to step in.

Which meant Lan Wangji needed to stop them, but the thought of physically breaking apart the fight made his skin crawl, and there was something wrong with his husband.

So Lan Wangji left the men to fight and stepped closer to Wei Wuxian. As soon as Lan Wangji did, however, his eyes drifted sideways and away from Wei Wuxian.

Alarmed, Lan Wangji reached for Wei Wuxian only for his hand to slip past as Wei Wuxian's features blurred and started melting, radiating with a darkness that stilled the breath in Lan Wangji's chest.

He tried calling for Wei Wuxian, only for the words to die in his throat, a familiar panic stealing his voice. It closed around him like a deadweight, pulling him under until his powers started slipping, lowering the temperature in the room as frost curled at his feet.

Wei Ying, come back.

Suddenly, there was a loud *crunch*.

Jin Zixun let out a string of curses, and Lan Wangji turned to see a fresh wave of blood coating Jin Zixun's face. Jin Zixun howled, then raked his claws across Jiang Wanyin's face before Jiang Wanyin roughly pinned him against the floor.

And then, a sharp command rang throughout the room and froze everyone in their place.

"Enough!"

Lan Wangji breathed in the familiar scent of power that accompanied the voice and automatically relaxed. *Shufu.*

Lan Qiren stood at the room's entrance with a shaking servant at his back, her eyes wide as she clutched the back of Lan Qiren's robes. Lan Qiren's expression was dark; the anger clear in his eyes as he glared.

Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun kept fighting. Lan Qiren strode forward, yanked them apart by the back of their robes like hatchlings, then froze their feet to the floor.

"What the *fu—"* Jiang Wanyin cut himself off when he saw who had pulled them apart. He flinched under Lan Qiren's glare, tail lashing, then spat a greeting as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Jin Zixun had fallen backwards with his feet iced to the floor, wailing as he tried stopping his nose from bleeding. Several Jins quickly rushed forward to help him, pulling out cloths to press against his nose while others tidied his robes.

"What is the meaning of this?" Lan Qiren demanded, looking from Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun to Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji straightened and greeted his uncle properly before responding. "There was a…" Lan Wangji paused, looking at Wei Wuxian quickly before returning to Lan Qiren. "Disagreement."

"A simple disagreement resulted in two ambassadors fighting like children?" Lan Qiren scoffed. Jin Zixun immediately protested, then wilted under Lan Qiren's sharp order to *be quiet.*

Jiang Wanyin at least looked sufficiently remorseful, lips pressed together and head bowed.

“Jin Zixun was demanding supplies the Jin don’t need,” Jiang Wanyin offered, then clicked his mouth shut when Lan Qiren narrowed his eyes.

“Lies!” Jin Zixun spat. Lan Qiren whirled on him with a flash of anger.

“You two will say no more, do you understand me?” Lan Qiren said. “This meeting is over,” he commanded with a gesture to the other ambassadors. “Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun will accompany myself to the throne room to seek punishment for their actions.”

Both men objected as everyone else slowly filtered from the room. Lan Qiren didn’t respond to either man’s protests; merely unfroze their feet from the floor with a look of contempt.

“We do not take it lightly when the most sacred rules of our sect are broken within the palace. And during a peace meeting, no less.”

Lan Qiren glanced at Lan Wangji. “Wangji, you will come with us to explain what happened, as I assume you were not involved.”

“Yes, Shufu,” Lan Wangji replied, his tail twitching when Lan Qiren’s gaze slid past him to Wei Wuxian.

Lan Wangji was relieved when Wei Wuxian greeted Lan Qiren and asked if he could join them. Whatever had prevented Lan Wangji from looking at Wei Wuxian seemed to have passed, but the smell of his anger lingered, twisting unpleasantly through the air.

“If you plan on preventing your martial brother from being punished, then there is no need to come,” Lan Qiren said. Wei Wuxian dipped his head and tucked his hands into his sleeves.

“This one does not wish to stop his punishment. This one only wishes to provide clarity to what caused the disturbance, as he has witnessed for himself the accusations his brother has fought to defend.”

Wei Wuxian’s deferent tone rang hollowly, sounding too much like how he had spoken during their wedding and first meetings. It pulled at Lan Wangji’s chest, urging him to wrap his husband in his arms until the light he always carried came back to his eyes.

Lan Qiren considered his request then assented before turning and striding from the room, expecting everyone to follow.

Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun went reluctantly, refusing to look at one another. Wei Wuxian moved forward before Lan Wangji could, and Lan Wangji tucked his discomfort away in leu of following Wei Wuxian into the hall.

Jin Zixun complained about being dragged in front of the emperor the entire time it took them to get to the throne room. Jiang Wanyin muttered snide comments and growled whenever Jin Zixun so much as looked at him, and Lan Qiren eventually had to step between the men with a sharp reprimand.

Wei Wuxian didn’t speak the entire trip.

His quietness felt wrong, but Lan Wangji didn't know how to break it without causing further harm. He could only watch Wei Wuxian walk briskly forward, radiating a tension that created a barrier between them.

When they arrived at the throne room, Lan Qiren led them past the confused guards and inside without breaking stride.

The throne room wasn't large in accordance to the Lan doctrines. Only a small dais marked where the emperor sat at one end of the room, with plain tables and cushions being the lone furniture. Banners with the Lan crest covered the walls, resulting in a calm space that welcomed serenity and order.

A meeting must have recently ended, as there were various officers and scribes lingering around the edges of the room, milling about as they traded scrolls and whispered words.

And at the far end of the room Lan Xichen knelt behind his desk on the dais, murmuring in a low voice to Jin Guangyao, who knelt by his side taking notes on a scroll.

The entire hall went silent as soon as Lan Qiren entered.

Lan Xichen looked up, a smile gracing his features when he saw Lan Wangji. And then he noticed the remainder of the group and his smile vanished, replaced by a furrowed brow and concern.

Lan Qiren led the group to the dais before ordering Jin Zixun and Jiang Wanyin to step forward.

Both men had straightened their robes, but Jin Zixun's sleeves were torn and practically falling off, and Jiang Wanyin's face was scuffed and bleeding. Jin Zixun's nose had stopped bleeding, but it was now swollen and bent, clearly broken and likely painful.

They made quite a pair in front of Lan Xichen, who looked them over with a minute grimace.

"Shufu, what has happened here?" Lan Xichen asked. Beside him, Jin Guangyao's face went carefully blank as he moved behind Lan Xichen's shoulder, standing ready like a servant.

"A servant had the foresight to alert me that a fight had broken out during one of the peace meetings," Lan Qiren explained as he followed Jin Guangyao's movement. Lan Xichen's eyes widened and then his gaze turned sharp, cold in a way that made Lan Wangji hate the mantle his brother held.

"Why it happened is yet to be determined, but there is no excuse for such violence within our walls," Lan Qiren added with a huff, tucking his hands into his sleeves as he sternly glared at Jin Zixun and Jiang Wanyin.

"No excuse? But he insulted the Jin!" Jin Zixun exclaimed as he turned a beseeching look toward Lan Xichen. Jiang Wanyin scoffed and lashed his tail, taking a threatening step toward Jin Zixun, who squeaked and backed away in panic.

“Jiang Wanyin, calm yourself,” Lan Xichen ordered. Jiang Wanyin stiffened before he begrudgingly huffed and backed off.

“Wangji, is it true they were fighting?” Lan Xichen asked and Lan Wangji dipped his head.

“Mn.” He allowed. “But the fight was not unprompted.”

“Of course it wasn’t unprompted,” Jiang Wanyin hissed. “That bastard was trying to steal provisions—”

“We weren’t trying to steal anything!” Jin Zixun interrupted, his ears turning back. “Are you part of the Jin sect? How dare you accuse us of lying when we took on the responsibility of keeping the Wen prisoners away from the rest of the sects!”

Lan Xichen blinked at the outburst, his eyes straying to Jin Zixun’s visible features before he glanced back at Jin Guangyao. The look was heavy, and they appeared to have a silent conversation that Lan Wangji couldn’t follow before Jiang Wanyin’s protests drew their attention.

“Responsibility? It was the least the Jin could do considering how you avoided fighting in most of the war.”

“You—!” Jin Zixun shouted, ignoring Lan Qiren when he stepped between Jin Zixun and Jiang Wanyin, trying to calm them down.

“I’m sure there simply has been a misunderstanding—” Lan Xichen offered, but Jin Zixun continued speaking as if Lan Xichen hadn’t said a word.

“What, like when they let the Wens invade Lotus Pier? Where were him and his parents then?”

Jiang Wanyin snarled, and then before anyone could stop them Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun were fighting again, held at bay by Lan Qiren as they slung insults until their voices were ringing throughout the room.

Lan Wangji flinched at the noise and shifted closer to Wei Wuxian. On the dais, Jin Guangyao was staring at both men in horror while Lan Xichen flushed, unable to get a word in.

The frown marring Lan Xichen’s face grew, and then he stood and sent a wave of ice throughout the room.

“That is *enough.”*

Lan Wangji only felt a brush of warmth when his brother’s ice washed over him, but it was harsh and startling enough to Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun to break them apart.

The look Lan Xichen sent Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun made both men wither, and Jin Zixun fell to his knees, bowing and begging for forgiveness.

Lan Xichen ignored Jin Zixun in favor of turning to Wei Wuxian.

“Wei Wuxian, I assume you are here because you were also at the meeting in question?” Lan Xichen asked, and Wei Wuxian politely dipped his head.

“This one was present, your majesty.”

Wei Wuxian’s voice sounded wrong again, and Lan Wangji hesitantly brushed against Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, curling his tail underneath Wei Wuxian’s. Wei Wuxian didn’t visibly react, his face staying blank as he stared at Lan Xichen.

But his tails twitched under Lan Wangji’s, and he grasped onto Lan Wangji’s robes with a grip so tight Lan Wangji worried he might tear his sleeve from the seams.

“Then I must ask you to explain the original issue, as someone who wasn’t involved in the altercation,” Lan Xichen said. Wei Wuxian bowed without letting go of Lan Wangji’s sleeve.

“The issue arose because the Jin expect a drought during the next growing season, and they asked for more resources to accommodate the war camps so their people would not go hungry,” Wei Wuxian explained. Lan Xichen listened with a furrowed brow; confusion written clearly across his face.

“That is a reasonable request, is it not?” Lan Qiren asked as he stroked his beard. “The strain of managing the war camps should not put the common people at risk.”

“Yes, Lan-xiansheng, it is a reasonable request,” Wei Wuxian replied, his voice hollow. “Except there are no people left in the Jin war camps.”

“Your majesty, it isn’t true! Why wouldn’t there be prisoners in the camps? Where else would they be?” Jin Zixun interjected, stepping closer to the dais. Jin Guangyao shifted in front of Lan Xichen, a pleasant smile stretched across his face as he calmly told Jin Zixun to keep his distance.

Lan Xichen sighed, grasping Jin Guangyao’s hand and pulling him down to kneel, murmuring something soft that Lan Wangji couldn’t catch. Whatever he said was enough for the tension to leave Jin Guangyao, and he deferentially bowed his head.

Jin Zixun, however, seemed to miss the entire exchange, because instead of staying where he was he stepped *closer* to the dais, a counterargument already falling from his lips.

And then Jin Zixun’s mouth snapped shut and his eyes widened. He made several muffled sounds, trying and failing to open his mouth as he looked between the three Lan present in a desperate attempt to figure out who silenced him.

Lan Wangji carefully kept his own face blank as he caught a flash of amusement in his brother’s eyes. When Jiang Wanyin barked a laugh at Jin Zixun, however, Lan Wangji calmly sealed his lips shut as well.

Lan Xichen’s lips twitched, his eyes filling with delight. But he didn’t reprimand Lan Wangji, and ignored both men’s muffled protests as he gestured to Wei Wuxian.

“Could you explain in more detail what has occurred? Because accusations such as this are grave, and not ones that should be made lightly.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, then recounted a story that made Lan Wangji's blood run cold.

A story about a woman’s desperate attempts to find her brother, lost and alone and wretched enough that Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin provided her their aid. Of arriving at a war camp filled with death and blood, the stench in the air thick enough that it didn’t leave their clothes for days.

Of finding every single prisoner dead, their bodies littered with arrows and discarded for scavengers to devour.

Wei Wuxian didn’t waver as he talked, and Lan Wangji could do nothing but watch as his husband spoke with lifeless eyes, seemingly numb to the violence he reported.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji whispered when Wei Wuxian finished, fighting against the ache spreading through him. When Wei Wuxian didn’t respond, Lan Wangji gently grasped Wei Wuxian’s shoulders, then turned and tucked his husband against his chest.

Wei Wuxian went willingly and buried his face in Lan Wangji’s neck, his hand still gripping Lan Wangji’s sleeve. Lan Wangji rumbled and pulled Wei Wuxian closer, heedless of those around them.

“You are safe here,” Lan Wangji murmured, and Wei Wuxian’s breath hitched against his neck. Wei Wuxian dug a hand into the back of Lan Wangji’s robes and collapsed into his arms, minutely shaking as the thick scent of fear and anger wreathed around them.

“A-Yao?”

Lan Wangji lifted his head at the sound of his brother’s voice. Lan Xichen had rested a hand on Jin Guangyao’s shoulder, his face full of concern. Jin Guangyao appeared pale, slightly trembling, and he slowly returned Lan Xichen’s gaze.

“This one…has not heard of such mistreatment occurring in the war camps,” he said, his voice unsteady. “It mustn’t be true; there are Lan and Nie cultivators in the camps to hold the Jin accountable, and this one can assure his majesty that the only prisoners in the camps are Wen cultivators.”

Lan Xichen nodded as relief filled his eyes, then Jiang Wanyin tore open the seal on his mouth, spitting blood.

“Who would’ve been left to tell you?” Jiang Wanyin snapped. “The prisoners were all dead!”

“Jiang Wanyin,” Lan Xichen sternly responded. “You will conduct yourself in an appropriate manner or I will have you removed.”

Jiang Wanyin flinched but shut his mouth, stepping backwards. Lan Xichen grimaced then motioned to Wei Wuxian, who had lifted his head from Lan Wangji’s neck.

“Wei Wuxian, is there any evidence to support your claims?” Lan Xichen asked. Wei Wuxian paused, then stepped from Lan Wangji’s arms. Lan Wangji forced himself not cling to his husband, and settled for wrapping his tail around Wei Wuxian’s legs.

After a long pause, Wei Wuxian bowed his head. “There is not. My brother and I buried the dead so as to prevent their spirits from turning resentful and attacking the nearby villages.”

“What of the woman who told you this? Who brought you there?”

“She…” Wei Wuxian trailed off, his gaze dropping to the floor.

“She killed herself after finding her brother’s body left in the mud to rot,” Jiang Wanyin interjected. Lan Xichen paled and Jin Guangyao recoiled. Lan Qiren breathed a protest in disbelief.

In the silence, Jin Zixun stepped closer to the dais, urgently trying to talk but unable to break the seal on his mouth.

“Your majesty, could you…?”

Lan Xichen waved away the seal at Jin Guangyao’s request, then watched with wide eyes as Jin Zixun spat on the ground in front of Jiang Wanyin.

“Of course the woman they claim led them to the camps is dead,” Jin Zixun said. “With her out of the picture, who else can question their word? They could say whatever they want and we’d have to believe them on their word alone.”

“Your majesty, this one would like to acknowledge the truth of his words,” Jin Guangyao softly added. “This one is in charge of the war camps’ oversight and has heard nothing of such violence happening.”

“Have you ever even visited any of the camps, you piece of—”

Jiang Wanyin abruptly stopped when Lan Xichen held up a hand. Lan Xichen shared a look with Jin Guangyao, then slowly stood and straightened his posture until he looked every inch of the cultivation sects’ emperor.

“I have made my decision on this matter,” Lan Xichen said, then paused when Jin Guangyao stepped in front of him with a bow.

“Before his majesty speaks, this one would like to offer to leave the palace ahead of the Jin delegation so he may personally check on the status of the remaining war camps.”

Lan Xichen pulled Jin Guangyao from his bow with a soft smile, his hands lingering on Jin Guangyao’s arms.

“I will allow you to do so, A-Yao. But do not leave for a few days, as there are some things we've yet to discuss,” Lan Xichen said before releasing him. Jin Guangyao dipped his head then quickly backed his way from the room.

As soon as he left, Lan Xichen turned with a stern look toward Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun.

“It is my decision that both ambassador Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun will be relieved of their duties for the next three months as punishment for their actions today. They will also be confined to their quarters for the next three days, and will not be allowed to leave the wings of the palace their contingents are residing in until their contingents leave,” Lan Xichen explained.

“The Jin must assign a new head ambassador to replace Jin Zixun, and the palace will send a missive to notify Lotus Pier that someone else must be sent,” Lan Xichen added. Jin Zixun and Jiang Wanyin protested the punishment and Lan Xichen stiffened, his expression turning cold.

“Do you wish to defy the emperor?” Lan Xichen asked, and both men quickly backed off.

Jiang Wanyin clenched his hands and glared at the floor. “Might this one at least be allowed to visit his brother and nephew?”

Lan Xichen paused, turning to Lan Wangji.

“I do not wish to bar Wei Ying from his family,” Lan Wangji murmured and Lan Xichen sighed, warmth returning to his gaze.

“You may visit your family once three days have passed.”

Jiang Wanyin bowed and thanked Lan Xichen for his leniency. Lan Wangji glanced at Wei Wuxian to see his response, then stiffened when he realized that Wei Wuxian had gone still, his eyes faraway with the look of someone who had drifted too far.

And before Lan Wangji could pull his husband back from wherever he had gone, Lan Xichen dismissed everyone and asked the guards to escort Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun to their respective quarters.

Lan Qiren left in a swirl of robes, following the guards as they led Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixun away. On the dais, Lan Xichen looked exhausted, rubbing his brow as servants rushed forward to bring him tea and something to eat.

Wei Wuxian hadn’t moved, and Lan Wangji abruptly wanted to return to their quarters. To take Wei Wuxian from this room and bring the life back into his eyes.

It was distressingly easy for Lan Wangji to pull his husband from the hall and through the palace to their rooms.

Wei Wuxian went without protest, unresponsive as he stared at the floor and trailed behind Lan Wangji. He still gripped one of Lan Wangji’s sleeves, and it was that point of contact that kept Lan Wangji from panicking as he guided Wei Wuxian around scattering servants and into their rooms.

It was early enough in the afternoon that A-Yuan wasn’t there when they returned. Mo Xuanyu, however, was puttering around and smiled when they stepped inside.

Mo Xuanyu's smile quickly fell when he saw Wei Wuxian's state.

"Your highness, is everything—"

Mo Xuanyu flinched when Wei Wuxian let go of Lan Wangji and moved toward him, anger spilling from Wei Wuxian with every step. Mo Xuanyu stumbled backwards and nearly fell over a low desk, but Wei Wuxian paid him no attention. Instead, he glided past Mo Xuanyu and into the courtyard.

Lan Wangji checked on Mo Xuanyu to assure he was alright, then hurried after Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian's ears had appeared, and he pulled what looked like a makeshift sword from under the porch before storming to the middle of the courtyard.

And then he slid into the most devastatingly beautiful sword forms Lan Wangji had ever seen.

Wei Wuxian moved as if his anger was an extension of himself, his movements rippling and sharp like a river swelled from a storm. The stick he used as a sword whistled as he lashed at invisible enemies and his robes spun in a dazzling mix of red and blue.

Lan Wangji could only watch as his husband worked his way through each form until his body started blurring, dripping with a darkness that told Lan Wangji to *look away, lest he suffer.*

But Lan Wangji couldn't tear his eyes from Wei Wuxian; his skin itched, blood rushing with an unrelenting urge to shift into his spirit form and *take.* To tear his husband from the darkness and press him into the ground, *devouring his anger and pain until Wei Wuxian came back to him.*

Until Wei Wuxian laughed like sunshine and Lan Wangji could bury his face into the warmth of his neck.

Despite himself, Lan Wangji whined in distress as he fought his instincts, curling his hands into fists and almost freezing himself to the ground.

He didn't realize that he had stepped into the courtyard until Wei Wuxian turned and *snarled* at him; claws raised, tails lashing under his robes, and a tar-like blackness whispering horrors against Lan Wangji's mind.

Lan Wangji's breath stuttered, frost drifting from his lips before he forced himself to leave the courtyard lest he tackle Wei Wuxian to the ground.

"Your highness, what happened?"

Mo Xuanyu's tentative question broke Lan Wangji from his thoughts. The teen looked concerned—tail curled around his legs and ears pressed back as he snuck glances into the courtyard.

Lan Wangji rumbled threateningly before he could stop himself, a pulse of heat washing through him at the thought of someone else seeing Wei Wuxian in his current state.

And then Mo Xuanyu recoiled, and Lan Wangji abruptly returned to himself.

The room smelled of fear and anger, and Lan Wangji breathed deeply, forcing himself to relax. Mo Xuanyu had started hiccupping, sinking into himself as he covered his face and spilled apologies.

“You have done nothing wrong,” Lan Wangji said. Mo Xuanyu froze then slowly lifted his head, eyes filled with tears. Yet again, Lan Wangji reminded himself to ask his brother the extent of what had happened to Mo Xuanyu in Jinlintai.

For now, Lan Wangji would make do with what Wei Wuxian had begun.

Lan Wangji shifted past Mo Xuanyu and into Wei Wuxian’s room, swiftly gathering the makeshift nest from beside Wei Wuxian’s bed and carrying it back to set beside his own.

His tail flicked back and forth as he contemplated whether he had moved the nest properly. He wasn’t sure what made it a nest and not a pile a blankets, and after staring unsuccessfully for several moments he huffed, pulled a sheet from his bed to add to the pile, then turned toward Mo Xuanyu.

Mo Xuanyu stared at him with wide eyes, a look of shock written across his face.

“Your highness, that’s…” Mo Xuanyu trailed off, his cheeks turning red.

“Mn. For you,” Lan Wangji nodded, then left Mo Xuanyu to gawk at the nest as he started retrieving the gifts he had prepared for Wei Wuxian.

Lan Wangji began by lifting Wei Wuxian’s sword, suibian, from a chest and carrying it to the low table. Mo Xuanyu gasped, and Lan Wangji turned to see him buried in the makeshift nest, only his face visible. He squeaked when he realized Lan Wangji was watching, then fully hid himself under the blankets.

Lan Wangji silently approved, and left Mo Xuanyu to settle himself.

With suibian laid on the table, Lan Wangji swiftly added several jars of spices from Lotus Pier and Wei Wuxian’s finished entrance token. Lan Wangji had requested the spices from Jiang Wanyin in passing, after which the man had scowled and stormed off.

Lan Wangji assumed that he had somehow insulted Jiang Wanyin, and had been trying to arrange for spices to be transported to the palace when Jiang Wanyin had returned and shoved the jars into his arms. He had hissed and fled when Lan Wangji thanked him, and Lan Wangji had faintly wondered whether all Jiang disciples were as headstrong as his husband and his martial brother.

Lan Wangji had thought it possible the spices might explain their behavior, and in a fit of curiosity had tried the mildest one.

The spice *had decidedly not* been mild, and Lan Wangji had walked as fast as he dared to the healer’s wing to seek relief.

Thankfully, Wei Wuxian's entrance token hadn't been as harrowing to acquire.

Lan Wangji trailed his fingers over the deep blue jade, a clear opposite to his own white token. The carvings were expertly crafted; one side bearing the Lan seal, and the other holding a nine-tailed fox curled around blooming lotuses, the fox's eyes mischievous and playful.

Lan Wangji had wanted to give the token a purple tassel, but his uncle had spit blood at the sight of the *huli jing*, and Lan Wangji had allowed the craftsmen to add a more traditional white one.

The pile of gifts on the table was small, albeit each valuable in their own way.

But it wasn't enough, his instincts whispered, and Lan Wangji helplessly turned and pulled out the clothes he had also requested for Wei Wuxian.

They weren't the same robes that had been commissioned for Wei Wuxian's arrival in the palace, as Lan Wangji had been unable to track down where those had ended up. Several servants had fallen to their knees during the process, shaking and crying about how they didn't know, had simply passed them to the next servant, before Lan Wangji had given up and went to commission new ones himself.

Lan Wangji carefully laid the set of robes on the table, then tilted his head and picked up the entrance token.

The robes were for daily use: Lan in color but Jiang in style. Lan Wangji had chosen a dark blue for the outer robes, and had Gusu clouds embroidered in light blue around the collar. It offset nicely against the deep red inner robes.

Lan Wangji settled the entrance token on top of the robes, adjusting the token until it was just right, then stepped away to view his work.

He shifted on his feet, uneasy.

Surely it was enough.

He knew it was, that Wei Wuxian didn't collect things like dragons did, but the pile looked incomplete.

And so Lan Wangji pulled the last gift from his wardrobe and added it to the pile with a growing sense of defeat.

The second set of robes were much finer than the first, cut in the formal Lan style.

A sheer light blue outer layer rested over a deep blue middle layer and white inner layer, and each one was dusted with designs picked in the finest threads. The tailor had refused to put foxes on the robes themselves, but had acquiesced to having foxes dancing across the dark blue matching hair ribbon in slightly lighter-colored thread.

They were robes fit for the spouse of the crown prince and filled the remainder of the table nicely.

Lan Wangji fussed with the gifts, adjusting the robes and jars until the pile was perfect, then nodded to himself as he admired his work.

The only thing he didn't have was a dizi.

It was an uncommon enough instrument for a Lan that the palace didn't have a crafter within their walls. Which meant that Lan Wangji would need to take Wei Wuxian to Caiyi soon to get one, and he added another mental note to his growing list.

It was only then, standing in the silence of the room, that Lan Wangji realized he couldn't hear anymore noises coming from the courtyard.

Lan Wangji hesitantly went to the courtyard's entrance.

Wei Wuxian was standing in the center, chest heaving, hair falling from its ribbon, and looking completely drained. The stick he had been using hung limply from his hand and trailed on the ground.

Not wanting to surprise him, Lan Wangji softly rumbled as he approached Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian jolted, raising the stick in alarm before he realized who was approaching and quickly dropped it.

"Hanguang-jun, this one apologizes—"

Lan Wangji frowned, and Wei Wuxian clicked his mouth shut, tucking his hands into his sleeves and backing away. The movement reeked of fear, and Lan Wangji stifled the urge to lash his tail in frustration.

He wasn't a hatchling anymore, after all, and it would likely frighten his obstinate husband instead of indicating his displeasure at Wei Wuxian's deference.

"There is no need for apologies between us," Lan Wangji said as he slowly stepped closer.

"What?" Wei Wuxian asked, confusion pinching his brows together. But he hadn't moved further away, and it sent a curl of satisfaction through Lan Wangji's chest.

"We are equals," Lan Wangji continued. "Wei Ying may train as he sees fit." Lan Wangji closed the distance between them until he could smell the sweat wafting off Wei Wuxian. Surprisingly, it wasn't an unpleasant smell, and Lan Wangji's hands twitched against the impulse to pull his husband close and slide his fingers into his hair.

"And he needn't apologize for doing so." Lan Wangji rumbled louder as Wei Wuxian nodded and his face flushed a deep red. Satisfied, Lan Wangji tugged on Wei Wuxian's sleeve.

"Come."

Lan Wangji led Wei Wuxian into their rooms then stopped in front of the low table full of gifts, giving it one last appraisal before deeming it sufficient. He gestured to the gifts while watching Wei Wuxian's expression.

"Yours."

Wei Wuxian blinked, ears twitching. He looked from the gifts to Lan Wangji and back, his mouth open in a silent question. Lan Wangji huffed and knelt next to the table, pushing suibian forward.

"Yours," Lan Wangji repeated. "Wei Ying should not have been barred from his sword, and this is everything he was owed since marrying me." Lan Wangji frowned, looking down at his hands. "Wei Ying should have received these things as soon as he entered the palace."

Lan Wangji lifted his head when Wei Wuxian let out a strangled sound, then froze.

Because Wei Wuxian's tails were twitching behind him—even hidden under a layer of robes as they were—in clear delight, and the pure joy that radiated from Wei Wuxian was enough to make Lan Wangji flush.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian crooned. He swiftly knelt and pulled suibian into his lap, unsheathing his sword and running his hands along the blade. He chittered excitedly at the blade, then pulled the spice jars closer and opened them with glee.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian repeated, then proceeded to horrify Lan Wangji by *sticking his fingers into one of the spiciest jars before shoving them into his mouth.*

Wei Wuxian positively swooned while Lan Wangji sat there dazed, unable to look away from the brightly-colored spice that *his husband was currently licking off his fingers.*

"Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji blinked, glanced at the ice that was now spreading across the floor, then quickly brushed it away as his ears flamed. He ducked his head when Wei Wuxian laughed.

"…is Wei Ying pleased?" Lan Wangji eventually managed.

"How could I not be?" Wei Wuxian replied as he lifted the entrance token and turned it over in his hands. His smile grew when he saw the fox carved onto the back, and before Lan Wangji could prepare himself, his husband began purring.

It was a startingly soft sound.

One that Lan Wangji had only heard when Wei Wuxian cradled A-Yuan in his arms late at night, soothing his son to sleep. Lan Wangji responded with his own pleased rumble, barely noticing when Mo Xuanyu stumbled from the nest across the room and fled, squeaking that he'd retrieve tea and food.

And then Wei Wuxian set the token down and his purring stopped.

“Do you believe what I said about the war camps?” Wei Wuxian asked. Lan Wangji stopped rumbling, thrown.

“One should not make decisions without knowing the full situation,” Lan Wangji said, then stilled when Wei Wuxian’s expression twisted. Unable to watch the joy leaving his husband’s face, Lan Wangji cast about for a more suitable response.

“But it would not be prohibited if we…,” Wangji hesitated. “…wanted to visit the camps ourselves after arriving in Jinlintai for the wedding.”

The crown prince wasn’t barred from the camps, after all. And although Lan Wangji wasn’t *technically* allowed to visit them without forewarning and a significant amount of paperwork, no one would likely be brave enough to question his authority if he showed up unexpectedly.

Wei Wuxian grinned, and Lan Wangji was helpless to do anything but start planning which camps would be the easiest to visit while calling the least amount of attention to themselves.

“Thank you.”

At that, Lan Wangji looked away, his eyes dropping yet again to the gifts.

“No need for thank you either. Wei Ying would not lie about such an issue,” Lan Wangji said. Wei Wuxian chittered happily, then lifted the robes and ran his hands over them.

“We will go to Caiyi to acquire a dizi soon.”

Wei Wuxian paused; his hands buried in the soft robes. He looked genuinely confused.

“Wei Ying said he wanted to learn the dizi, not the guqin,” Lan Wangji added, warily watching as Wei Wuxian clenched his hands and sat up, his eyes wide.

“I wasn’t being serious, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said. “You don’t need to get me one because I complained about my lessons.”

Lan Wangji furrowed his brow.

“Aiya, don’t look at me like that!” Wei Wuxian cried. “This is more than enough.” He gestured frantically to the gifts, as if they weren’t the bare minimum Lan Wangji needed to provide to even begin making up for his husband’s mistreatment in the palace.

“Not enough,” Lan Wangji said as he wrapped his tail around his knees.

“Not enough? But Lan Zhan—alright, alright!” Wei Wuxian hastily stopped his protests when Lan Wangji’s frown grew. “But at least let me say that you needn’t get me a new one. Any old dizi would do.”

Any old dizi *would not do,* and Lan Wangji let the room grow chillier with his displeasure.

“There are no suitable ones in the palace. We will find one in Caiyi,” he firmly said. Wei Wuxian buckled under his look with a sigh, then buried his face in the robes.

“This is more than this husband could ever ask for,” Wei Wuxian whined. “Really, all that’s missing is Emperor’s Smile.”

Lan Wangji tilted his head then stood, scolding himself for missing something as he strode towards the door.

“Lan Zhan, I was joking!” Wei Wuxian called, and Lan Wangji’s steps stuttered before he kept going. Even if his husband was joking—and alcohol wasn’t allowed in the palace—Lan Wangji had already acquired meat for his meals; slipping in some alcohol surely couldn’t be more difficult.

Lan Wangji paused when he felt a tug on his sleeve.

“You don’t need to go right now,” Wei Wuxian softly said. “If we’re going to Caiyi for a dizi, we can pick some up then.”

Lan Wangji blinked, considering the suggestion before he gave a small nod.

“Good, now what if I try these new robes on instead?” Wei Wuxian asked as he looked back at the low table. “Ah, but I’m dirty from practicing my forms.”

Lan Wangji considered Wei Wuxian’s disheveled state, agreed, then sent a servant to fetch a bath before Wei Wuxian could protest. Wei Wuxian puffed his cheeks, but did nothing more than return to the low table and sit with an amused huff.

Mo Xuanyu returned with tea and some snacks while they waited for the bath. Lan Wangji contentedly sipped his tea while Wei Wuxian worked his way through the entire plate of snacks and rambled about how much he liked the gifts.

When the bath was ready, Lan Wangji readily offered to help Wei Wuxian wash his hair. He hadn’t intended to make the offer, but it rolled off his lips before he could think about it.

He shouldn’t have been surprised when Wei Wuxian rejected his offer.

They hadn’t done anything more intimate than hug, after all, and the least clothed Lan Wangji had seen Wei Wuxian had been on their wedding night. He had seen flashes of tanned skin when Wei Wuxian had been in the infirmary, but Lan Wangji had blocked such thoughts from his mind.

Too many had seen Wei Wuxian that night, and his wails echoed in Lan Wangji’s dreams, haunting and panicked until Lan Wangji woke in a cold sweat.

It didn’t mean that Lan Wangji didn’t want to see his husband, however, and he forced himself to return to the low table instead of watching his husband disappear behind a privacy screen. He listened to the sounds of cloth falling to the ground, then repeated the rules on honoring one’s spouse as he heard pleased noises and water splashing.

Mercifully, Wei Wuxian emerged from the bath before long, and then Lan Wangji had to repeat an entirely different set of rules.

Because Wei Wuxian had returned wearing nothing but his thin inner robes.

They clung to Wei Wuxian's chest and legs where trails of water dripped from his hair and stained the fabric a deeper shade of red. Wei Wuxian hadn't tied them fully closed, and Lan Wangji had to force his eyes away from the slip of tanned chest he could see.

Wei Wuxian held a jar of oil in one hand and a pair of combs in the other, and after a few moments hesitantly approached Lan Wangji and knelt before him.

He handed one comb and the hair oil to Lan Wangji, then turned around.

"It would be helpful if my husband could comb my hair while I handle my tails," Wei Wuxian said, and Lan Wangji almost dropped the oil and comb. He breathed slowly, settling his desire to *take* as he carefully eyed Wei Wuxian's hair.

Wei Wuxian hadn't hidden his ears, and didn't wait for Lan Wangi to begin before he used the other comb to start brushing his tails.

Lan Wangji dipped the comb in the oil, then began carding it gently through Wei Wuxian's hair.

They worked in silence until Lan Wangji started rumbling again, finding a peace in the routine movements that reminded him of when he had brushed his mother's hair. He softly untangled every knot he encountered, letting the comb pull through the strands until Wei Wuxian's hair had fully dried and shone in the fading light.

He hesitated over the tails Wei Wuxian hadn't brushed yet when he finished.

Wei Wuxian glanced over his shoulder at Lan Wangji, searching his face before smiling and shifting one of his tails into Lan Wangji's hands.

"I don't mind, if it's you," Wei Wuxian simply said, as if touching his features wasn't anything unusual.

As if it wasn't something reserved among the Lan for the most intimate of spouses, and made Lan Wangji's ears heat at the sheer trust Wei Wuxian was giving him.

"Mn." Lan Wangji rumbled louder as his hands sank into the soft fur.

***

A few days after the disastrous peace meeting, Lan Qiren found himself wondering what they had seen in Su She when they had promoted him to head of the palace's staff.

The man had been young, eager, and diligent as any other Lan disciple if Lan Qiren remembered correctly. But somewhere along the way something must have changed, for the once-eager disciple to be walking beside him now, spewing questions and demands about where Lan Qiren was taking him.

He was more aggravating than Wangji's husband.

At least Wei Wuxian looked remorseful when he had done something wrong.

Thankfully, they reached the meeting room Lan Qiren was taking Su She to before he was tempted to seal Su She's mouth shut.

Lan Qiren led Su She into the room, gesturing for him to kneel on one side of a low table before Lan Qiren joined his nephews on the other side. Su She looked confused but didn't protest, his face a clear contrast to Wangji's blank expression and Xichen's polite smile.

Even if it helped his nephews in these types of situations, Lan Qiren lamented that he hadn't taught them how to express their true feelings properly. Lan Qiren internally sighed, then drank the tea that was already poured, relishing the warmth before his nephews began speaking.

They didn't need Lan Qiren's help to methodically lay out the evidence they had gathered over several weeks against Su She. Lan Xichen did most of the talking, but Lan Wangji punctuated each point by pulling out scroll after scroll of signed testimonies to back each accusation.

Su She hadn't told the servants where Wei Wuxian's sword was, didn't have his new robes delivered or his preferences cared for. Didn't tell him he could freely roam the palace or leave the grounds—something that Wangji was particularly aggrieved about, if the way the room chilled when Xichen mentioned it was any indication.

Su She's face turned a darker purple with every charge, until he suddenly burst to his feet with a shout.

"This is preposterous!" Su She snapped. "Why should it be my fault if the servants can't do as they've been told?"

"But they weren't told," Lan Xichen calmly replied, lifting his head with a deceivingly gentle smile.

"Mn," Wangji echoed, pulling out yet another scroll and unrolling it for Su She to see.

"Do sit, and read their testimonies for yourself," Xichen added with a nod toward the scrolls. Su She huffed but knelt, then yanked the scroll closer. He skimmed several of them then angrily shoved them from the table.

"Surely you won't take the word of these servants over one of your own disciples?" Su She asked. Lan Qiren plucked the scrolls from the floor while Xichen hummed and his smile grew tighter.

"Surely not every servant would be telling us the same story unless it was true."

"But—"

"And *surely* they wouldn't mention they were forbidden from telling Mo Xuanyu anything, and then had to watch as you punished Mo Xuanyu repeatedly for not following orders he never received."

“That’s not…” Su She began, his mouth gaping as he fumbled his words. “He set me up!” He blurted, and Lan Qiren almost spat out the tea he had been drinking. *The gall of this man.*

Xichen’s smile abruptly vanished, and Su She misread his expression as a sign to continue.

“He’s been difficult ever since he came to the palace. Always complaining about even the smallest tasks, especially ones he can’t do properly,” Su She said. “Which isn’t surprising, considering he’s nothing but a filthy whore who chased after his own brother—"

In the middle of Su She’s speech, the entire room froze.

Lan Qiren set his now frozen tea on the table before looking around. The floors and walls were covered in a fine layer of ice, and judging from Wangji’s stunned expression, it wasn’t him who had let their powers flood the room.

For once, the anger on Xichen’s face was clearly visible; enough that Su She swallowed his words as Lan Xichen slowly rose to his feet.

“Mo Xuanyu is *fourteen,”* Xichen seethed, and ice began creeping up Su She’s robes.

Lan Qiren blanched at the reminder of Mo Xuanyu’s age. He hadn’t forgotten why the boy had been sent to the palace—or rather, why Xichen had brought him back—but he often forgot just how young the boy was, especially when considering what he had been accused of doing to his half-brother.

“And you clearly have let gossip sway your opinion to the point of abusing your power over him.”

Despite himself, Lan Qiren stiffened at the sheer anger dripping from Xichen’s tone.

Su She opened his mouth, babbling excuses before his mouth was sealed shut with a twist of Xichen’s hand.

“We did not bring you here to defend yourself,” Lan Xichen said. “For failing your duties and using your station to abuse your power, I hereby relieve you of your duties and your connection to this sect. You will have the remainder of the day to get your affairs in order, and will be escorted from the palace tomorrow at dawn.”

Su She paled with every word Xichen said, then desperately struggled to speak. He only stopped when the room grew colder and Xichen leveled him with a deadly glare.

It was moments like these, that Xichen reminded Lan Qiren of his own brother. Of the anger in his eyes as he faced the elders and begged them to spare his lover.

“Guards, please take this one back to his rooms,” Xichen called. The guards quickly appeared then dragged a struggling Su She away.

Only then did Xichen kneel again and sweep the ice from the room. Wangji turned to his brother, resting a hand on his sleeve as they exchanged words too soft for Lan Qiren to hear.

Granting them their privacy, Lan Qiren sighed as he lifted the teapot and set about preparing a fresh pot of tea.

***

Lan Qiren found himself wandering the halls after curfew later that evening, a rare disquiet forcing him to move lest he lay in bed for shichen without welcoming sleep.

It was a rare allowance for himself, and he took solace in knowing that none but the night guards roamed the halls with him.

And so he was sufficiently surprised when, as he stood staring into a garden, Jin Guangyao appeared beside him.

“This one was hoping he would find you,” Jin Guangyao said as he greeted Lan Qiren. Lan Qiren huffed in response, waving away his bow.

“It’s past curfew,” Lan Qiren replied and Jin Guangyao bowed again, murmuring a quick apology.

“This one was hoping you might know of something to soothe one’s mood,” Jin Guangyao explained. “I’ve come from his majesty’s room because he has been having trouble sleeping. I fear lingering in such ill feelings for too long will bring him harm.”

Lan Qiren finally turned toward Jin Guangyao, hiding a flare of annoyance at the man’s request. Because it spoke of a comfort with his nephew that Lan Qiren didn’t approve of.

Jin Guangyao wore nothing but his inner robes, looking soft and pitiful as he waited for Lan Qiren to respond. His hair was down, and Lan Qiren almost spit blood when he realized the man’s features were also showing, *because Jin Guangyao had come from Xichen’s rooms looking like that.*

Jin Guangyao sighed when Lan Qiren didn’t respond. “This one would go to the medical wing himself, but would prefer not to leave his majesty alone for too long.”

Lan Qiren carefully swallowed his growing resentment for the sake of his nephew.

“I will fetch something for him so you may return,” he allowed. Jin Guangyao thanked him, bowed, then vanished all too easily into the night.

The walk across the palace to the healer’s wing was blessedly quiet.

Only the guards dipped their heads as Lan Qiren passed, and when he stepped into the healer’s main room there was no one there aside from a young apprentice who was bent over a pile of herbs.

She startled into a low bow when Lan Qiren announced himself, and frowned when Lan Qiren asked after Lan Xichen’s usual doctor.

“He’s currently sleeping,” the apprentice whispered, ducking her head as she wrung her hands. “But this one could wake him for you?”

Lan Qiren held up a hand. “There’s no need, as it’s nothing serious. Who’s currently on call?”

“Doctor Liu,” the apprentice said. “She’s preparing the gardens before the first snow.”

Lan Qiren thanked the apprentice, then followed her directions to the herbal gardens.

The courtyard the gardens were in was lit by the moon when Lan Qiren arrived, the light turning the many beds of herbs soft despite their yellowing leaves and bloomless stems. Liu Qing knelt in one of the farthest beds, tending to the plants with various supplies scattered around her.

Lan Qiren walked silently toward Liu Qing, and was about to announce his presence when he realized that Liu Qing looked different than usual.

She had tied both her sleeves back and twisted her hair into a bun, giving her a somewhat melancholy air as she worked in the silence of the night. It wasn’t anything Lan Qiren hadn’t seen the other doctors do before, but it was unlike her usually stoic demeanor.

And then he noticed the scars.

Pale in the moonlight, there were several thin scars dusting the back of her neck, and what looked like a mess of burn scars littered across her arms. They made Lan Qiren hesitate, and it was only then that he noticed Liu Qing was silently crying.

Lan Qiren abruptly cleared his throat, knowing he was seeing something he shouldn’t.

Liu Qing didn’t flinch, but simply paused with her hands full of herbs. She looked at Lan Qiren then set aside her work, dusting her clothes off and dashing a hand under her eyes to remove the tears.

“I was hoping that you might have something to settle one’s mood, as the day has been unkind to Xichen,” Lan Qiren said, forcing his gaze not to drop to her arms. She paused, looking him over before nodding.

“I have a tea that should suffice. Please follow me,” she replied, then led the way back into a small side room. The room held nothing more than a desk littered with herbs and various utensils, and Lan Qiren watched Liu Qing work as she ground herbs into a fine mix.

Her movements were precise, practiced and easy with an expertise the other doctors were quick to praise. She had been a surprising addition to their ranks, but not an unwelcome one, if for no other reason than she seemed to be the only one Wei Wuxian trusted with medical issues.

Of which the boy had many.

“Wei Wuxian…are his scars from the war?” Lan Qiren quietly wondered, and he didn’t realize he had spoken aloud until Liu Qing stilled and gave him a considering look.

After a few moments Liu Qing returned to her work. “The scars are not from what one might expect.”

Lan Qiren frowned, troubled by what her words implied. Because if Wei Wuxian hadn’t gotten them from the war, then *where had he—?*

“Should I be concerned that Wei Yuan has similar ones?”

“Wei Wuxian is enough of a father to ensure his son doesn’t bear the same,” Liu Qing said, her expression fierce. Lan Qiren relaxed at her response. It was difficult enough that Wei Wuxian bore such scars, but if Wei Yuan had had the same…

Lan Qiren was pulled from his thoughts when Liu Qing shoved a satchel into his hand. She quickly explained how to brew the leaves properly, and Lan Qiren thanked her before turning to leave.

He paused at the door, however, looking back at Liu Qing with a question in his eyes.

“Whomever has hurt Wei Wuxian…may I assume they are unable to continue doing so?”

Liu Qing hesitated before returning Lan Qiren’s gaze. “I assure you they cannot.”

“…and whomever has hurt you?”

Liu Qing startled, eyes flickering to her arms before she straightened. “I am not in any danger from those in the palace.”

Satisfied, Lan Qiren nodded and left, the late hour finally dragging at his eyes.

It was only after he had delivered the medicine and returned to his rooms that he realized Liu Qing hadn’t actually answered his question.

Chapter End Notes

I can't explain how much I love lxc, lqr, and wq, and this chapter was my way for them to receive more screentime. Also, this entire chapter is mostly an ode to how many ways wwx can unintentionally ruin his husband before he snaps. Double also, I've waited 90k to kick Su She from the palace and heck was it satisfying.

Extras:
Me, while writing this chapter: oh no, what if wwx and lwj are moving too fast
My readers: it's been 90k and they haven't even kissed yet?? and they're already married???
Me: -sweats-

CW: violence, references to suicide, implied sexual prostitution of a minor (no actual depiction nor prostitution occurs)

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience! \(QwQ)/

I kept trying to finish this chapter where I wanted to, but then it kept getting longer, and the characters kept hissing at me, and lxc kept being a gremlin of a brother.

Needless to say that I had to split this chapter in half so it wasn't like 15k. But on the upside, most of the next chapter is already written! Yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning after the peace meeting, Wei Wuxian woke to the horrifying realization that he had not only let his powers slip in front of Lan Wangji, but had also *snarled* at him like a feral animal.

And yet, all his husband had done was pile him with a confusing number of gifts and rumble well into the evening as he had steadily combed Wei Wuxian's tails until they shone.

Wei Wuxian had warily waited the entire day to receive punishment for using his powers, but Lan Wangji never mentioned what had happened. The next few days continued to drift by without issue, and Wei Wuxian grew more and more tense until he blurted to Lan Wangji that he wanted to know what his punishment was going to be.

They had been steadily completing missives in Lan Wangji's rooms for most of the afternoon, and Lan Wangji paused at the question, brow furrowing and brush stilling over the paper he was correcting.

Wei Wuxian held his breath as he waited, ears pressed back as he watched Lan Wangji's reaction. From across the room, Mo Xuanyu squeaked and fled with the pretense of getting tea.

"I do not understand," Lan Wangji slowly said as he set down his brush and turned toward Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian awkwardly shuffled his own papers around, unable to meet Lan Wangji's gaze.

"I don't mind if you're mad. I know I broke several rules by using my powers," Wei Wuxian said, then looked up when Lan Wangji's tail thumped against the ground.

"I am not—" Lan Wangji paused, seeming to search for what he wanted to say. "Wei Ying did nothing wrong."

“One shall not use their powers excessively within palace walls,” Wei Wuxian quoted, his tails shifting uneasily. “I almost attacked the *crown prince.”*

The thought of hurting Lan Wangji—even unintentionally—was a painful one; reminiscent of when he had been younger and couldn’t control his powers and darkness bled from his nightmares, leeching around Jiang Cheng in their shared room until they had both woke screaming.

Lan Wangji huffed, a breath of frost clouding the air. “It is no error to use one’s powers in self-defense.” He held up a hand when Wei Wuxian protested, giving him a stern look before continuing.

“Wei Ying did not harm me. There will be no punishment.”

Wei Wuxian bit his tongue, swallowing the need to insist that it couldn’t be so simple. He had been nothing but angry, his powers vile and dark and lashing out at anything that drew near, falling far short of someone merely protecting themself.

“Are you sure?” Wei Wuxian asked. Lan Wangji flicked his tail back and forth in a smooth pattern.

“Mn.”

Wei Wuxian wilted in relief then stretched across the table, batting at Lan Wangji’s hands. “It can’t have felt good though. Jiang Cheng always complained about it.”

“It was not unbearable,” Lan Wangji said as he moved the paperwork away from Wei Wuxian’s wandering hands. “Wei Ying’s powers are a part of Wei Ying; I could not dislike them.”

Wei Wuxian paused, slightly baffled, then swatted at Lan Wangji’s inkwell. Lan Wangji huffed; lips pursing as he also moved the inkwell out of reach. Wei Wuxian knocked Lan Wangji’s brush off the table instead, and smiled when Lan Wangji let out an exasperated ‘*Wei Ying.’*

Lan Wangji retrieved his brush, methodically cleaned it, then paid Wei Wuxian no attention as he resumed his paperwork. A comfortable silence wreathed around them, and Wei Wuxian had almost dozed off when Lan Wangji placed his brush against the inkwell and made a low, inquisitive rumble.

“The darkness…,” Lan Wangji began then paused, smoothing his robes and meeting Wei Wuxian’s gaze. “How do Wei Ying’s powers work?”

Wei Wuxian hummed and pressed his face against the table.

Everything he knew he had learned from a combination of sheer luck and instinctive urges. Because Madam Yu had forbidden him from using his powers, he had taken to sneaking into the deepest lakes of Lotus Pier in the dead of night as a child to mess around.

Nights spent pulling shadows from the water and forming illusions to hide himself from patrols as he practiced and devoured any books on fox spirits he could find. Which hadn't been many, and those he did find often only warned of their danger without clearly explaining anything.

Wei Wuxian jolted from his thoughts when something tugged on his sleeve. He lifted his head to see that Lan Wangji had moved around the table to kneel beside him.

"You do not need to tell me if you do not want to." Lan Wangji gave another tug, then pulled Wei Wuxian from the table and settled his head in his lap.

Wei Wuxian flushed and stared up at Lan Wangji, ears twitching, then hastily turned on his side with a wheeze. The care in Lan Wangji's eyes was too much for him to handle, and Wei Wuxian tried rolling away, heart racing.

Lan Wangji, however, stubbornly held Wei Wuxian in place, forcing him to settle in defeat. Wei Wuxian whined and lamented his current position. *Be gentle with this poor husband!*

And then Lan Wangji began carding his hands through Wei Wuxian's hair, the touch gentle and soft and repetitive as he wrapped his tail around Wei Wuxian. The weight of his tail was comforting, *like he was being cradled in his mother's tails, buried in her scent while she hushed away his fears,* and Wei Wuxian found himself letting out a contented purr.

Safe.

"…I can change how people see me, or what they see around them," Wei Wuxian eventually said, his purring trailing off as he curled into his husband's stomach. Lan Wangji momentarily paused, then continued drawing his hands through Wei Wuxian's hair.

"I simply made my anger tangible in the courtyard." A skill Wei Wuxian had learned accidentally during a punishment, his anger toward Madam Yu dripping from his skin and wrapping around her, cloying and dark until he had fainted.

"Wei Ying?"

Wei Wuxian flinched, belatedly realizing he had dug his hands into Lan Wangji's robes, his claws tearing the fabric. He immediately let go, apologizing until Lan Wangji tweaked his ear.

"It is fine," Lan Wangji said. "Does it harm Wei Ying?"

Wei Wuxian shook his head and pressed his hands into the first layer of Lan Wangji's robes, absently fiddling with the soft ties.

"Not unless I'm creating something that isn't already there. But it's nothing that I can't handle," Wei Wuxian explained. It had single-handedly saved Jiang Cheng and himself many times during the war, even if the backlash had almost killed him.

Lan Wangji's tail tightened around Wei Wuxian as he pursed his lips, a furrow forming between his brows.

“Aiya, Lan Zhan, there’s no need to frown,” Wei Wuxian chided. “It’s much easier and more fun to change myself instead.”

Lan Wangji paused, pulling his hands from Wei Wuxian’s hair. “How others see Wei Ying?” he asked. At his confused look Wei Wuxian chuckled, twirling one of Lan Wangji’s robe ties around his finger.

“No, my actual body. It’s fun being a woman and letting Shijie do my hair,” Wei Wuxian said, tugging on the robe ties. He had spent many days running around Lotus Pier as a girl whenever Madam Yu was away, letting his Shijie dress him in her old robes and confusing everyone around the markets.

His shidi had caught on quickly, and they had tried assigning their ‘new’ shijie the duties they wanted to avoid, only to claim they were finished when Wei Wuxian switched back.

Jiang Fengmian, however, had fondly informed Wei Wuxian that Cangse Sanren had tried the same trick when they were young, and that if Wei Wuxian wanted to run around the pier in two different forms, he’d have to complete twice the amount of daily tasks.

Lost in his thoughts, it took Wei Wuxian a few moments to realize that the room had suddenly turned cold.

Wei Wuxian glanced up at Lan Wangji, only to find him coated in frost. Fractals covered his cheeks and hair, extending over his clothing and coating the room around them. It was uncomfortable and sharp and bit at Wei Wuxian’s skin, even though none of the ice touched him.

“Lan Zhan?”

His husband’s tail twitched and he let out a frozen breath, his gaze snapping to Wei Wuxian.

“Wei Ying has a female form?”

Wei Wuxian tilted his head at Lan Wangji’s bewildered expression. “How do you think I carried A-Yuan?” Wei Wuxian asked. “I needed a female form for that.”

Lan Wangji made a sound that could be best described as a wheeze, and then his ears turned bright red.

“What’s wrong?” Wei Wuxian asked as he pushed himself from Lan Wangji’s lap, forcing himself not to fidget under Lan Wangji’s unwavering stare.

“Wei Ying…” Lan Wangji finally said, his voice hesitant. “…is not A-Yuan’s father?”

“No, I’m his mother,” Wei Wuxian replied.

Lan Wangji whined, the noise distressed and feeble in a way that was deeply concerning.

“Didn’t you know? Madam Yu used my fertility to assure I was a viable option for continuing the royal line,” Wei Wuxian said, the words bitter and tainted that his worth had been reduced

to nothing more than what his body could produce.

Lan Wangji *flinched*, a minute shudder wracking him as he closed his eyes. The ice around them grew, stretching up the walls until their breaths clouded the air. Lan Wangji opened his mouth, closed it, then seemed to try again with a quick intake of breath.

“We did not know what Madam Yu spoke of.”

Wei Wuxian stared.

Because whatever he had been expecting Lan Wangji to say, it hadn’t been *that.*

“We were more concerned about the safety of you and your child.” Lan Wangji explained, his voice strained. “You are a *huli jing,* but also a war general. Without your efforts there would have been many casualties that could have been avoided.”

Lan Wangji paused, turning to look at the room around them before he lifted a hand and the ice covering the room vanished. “And A-Yuan had done nothing wrong. We did not take her threats towards him well.”

“So you agreed…” Wei Wuxian started, his voice catching in his throat.

“To protect Wei Ying and his son,” Lan Wangji confirmed.

Wei Wuxian shakily laughed and covered his face with a hand. “But you hadn’t even met me!”

Lan Wangji’s ears pinked and his eyes dropped to the floor. “It is unjust not to prevent harm if one is in the position to do so,” Lan Wangji replied, as if the marriage part of the negotiations had been an unavoidable outcome.

As if the Lan weren’t known for their devotion to their spouses and refusal to marry unless deeply in love.

It was so absurd that Wei Wuxian doubled over laughing, unable to stop his chest from heaving with a combination of relief and sheer bafflement.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian wheezed as he threw himself back into Lan Wangji’s lap. Lan Wangji’s lips twitched, and he wrapped his arms around Wei Wuxian to steady him.

“This husband is truly lucky to have been promised to you.”

Wei Wuxian grinned when Lan Wangji’s tail swished back and forth, his ears turning a delightful shade of red as he let out a soft *Mn.*

Wei Wuxian pressed himself close, clinging like a limpet and singing his praises until Lan Wangji gently pried him off with a stern look.

“Wei Ying, be serious.”

Wei Wuxian chittered in protest and Lan Wangji sighed, patting Wei Wuxian's head like he was consoling a child.

"Does Wei Ying having a female form mean that—" Lan Wangji hesitated, looking away. "—we might have children of our own one day?"

Wei Wuxian flushed, face burning and tails fluffing as fire curled in the pit of his stomach.

"Lan Zhan! Warn this husband before asking such things!" Wei Wuxian managed as he steadied himself against Lan Wangji's chest. "We could," he eventually acknowledged as he tried to ignore the heat raging through him.

Lan Wangji snapped his head toward Wei Wuxian, his gaze intense and heady enough that Wei Wuxian blurted the rest of his thoughts.

"I've already had one kit, another's not an issue."

Lan Wangji blinked, then in a fluid movement suddenly lifted Wei Wuxian into his arms and stood.

Wei Wuxian yelped and threw his arms around Lan Wangji's neck, gripping him tightly.

And then Lan Wangji strode over to his bed and settled Wei Wuxian onto it, cradling his head and still-healing tails gently enough that it didn't hurt.

Wei Wuxian's breath hitched as warmth consumed him, his thoughts skipping as Lan Wangji kneeled over him and trailed a hand over his face, brushing his hair from his eyes. Wei Wuxian briefly appreciated that Lan Wangji hadn't knelt on his tails, then nervously chittered when Lan Wangji caught his gaze and leaned close.

A small thrill of *want* burned through Wei Wuxian and he automatically trailed his hands up Lan Wangji's sides. He reveled in how Lan Wangji shuddered against his hands, ears red and panting, looking like he wanted to *devour Wei Wuxian until nothing remained.*

Wei Wuxian faintly wondered whether they could do anything with all their clothes on, and then the door to Lan Wangji's room slid open.

He turned to see Mo Xuanyu standing in the doorway carrying a tray of tea, mouth open and eyes wide with horror. Mo Xuanyu's face turned bright red as he stammered an apology and spun to face the wall, almost dropping the tray in the process.

The weight above Wei Wuxian vanished, and he pushed himself up to see Lan Wangji rushing from the room and vanishing into the halls.

"What just happened?" Wei Wuxian faintly asked, while Mo Xuanyu wailed and insisted he hadn't seen anything.

***

Lan Xichen had been buried under more work than usual due to the failed peace meeting and having to find Su She's replacement.

The Jiang sect had been livid when Lan Xichen had sent notice that they required a replacement for Jiang Wanyin—judging by the heaviness of Madam Yu's script in her polite but pointed response.

Reading her letter had nearly been as taxing as meeting with the woman herself, and halfway through Lan Xichen had had to take a break to knead the growing headache from his temples.

Nowhere in the letter had been an explanation of why he had received a response from Madam Yu and not her husband.

It was concerning, but Lan Xichen had reassured himself that if their sect leader was unwell, Jiang Wanyin would've returned home early.

Regardless, by the time Lan Xichen had written Madam Yu a response, he had taken one look at his notes for Su She's potential replacements then sought his uncle to see if they could visit the cold springs. His uncle had agreed, and had readily cleared their schedules for the next shichen.

The only problem, however, was that Lan Qiren was nosier than most would believe.

As they walked to the springs, Lan Qiren asked Lan Xichen—for the third time—whether sending Jin Guangyao to assess the remaining war camps was a good idea.

"I would rather avoid discussing intersect matters right now," Lan Xichen sighed, brushing stray branches out of the way. He loved his uncle, but when Lan Qiren was set against something he stayed steadfast in the face of anyone's opinion on the matter.

"My concern is that Jin Guangyao is a member of the Jin sect," Lan Qiren replied. "If what Wei Wuxian claims is true, then it is reasonable that Jin Guangyao would hide any evidence."

"A-Yao is not one to be swayed by sect loyalty, and I trust him to provide an accurate report," Lan Xichen said, pursing his lips. Lan Qiren huffed and folded his hands into his sleeves, walking steadily despite the clear ire coloring his tone.

"You are putting too much faith in someone who isn't family," Lan Qiren countered and Lan Xichen stopped walking, giving his uncle a pained look. *Not for lack of trying.*

"Need I remind you that he is the sole reason why Wangji isn't the emperor," Lan Xichen said, thoughts of fire and blood filling his mind. "My wounds were already infected when I fled the palace after the Wens breached our wards, and I was delirious with fever. My cultivation is high, but even I wouldn't have survived had A-Yao not found and cared for me."

Lan Xichen took no joy in the pain that flashed across his uncle's face. The night Lan Xichen had escaped was the same that Lan Qiren had found his own brother lying in a pool of blood; his seclusion doing little to save him from the onslaught of the Wens.

That Lan Xichen had made it out alive was nothing short of a miracle, and yet Jin Guangyao had never asked Lan Xichen for any favors in return.

Thankfully Lan Qiren didn't force the issue, which allowed them to walk in a strained silence until they reached the entrance of the cold springs.

The tension only drained from Lan Xichen's shoulders when they stepped into the small alcove where the springs were. Due to the cold water, the air around the springs was perpetually hazy, creating a heavy wetness that cooled Lan Xichen's frustration with every breath.

"I do not mean to be petulant about this issue," Lan Xichen softly said, not wanting to leave their conversation on a sour note. "It's simply that I—"

Lan Xichen cut himself off when he realized that someone was already in the water.

The springs weren't necessarily private, but Lan Xichen had assumed his uncle had sent word ahead to make sure they wouldn't be interrupted. Lan Xichen exchanged a confused look with his uncle before approaching the water's edge.

"It appears Wangji had a similar idea," Lan Qiren said, bemused, as the familiar features of Wangji appeared from across the pond. Lan Qiren started untying his robes and went to greet Wangji when Lan Xichen stopped him, eyes wide as he pointed to the water's edge.

Because the entire pond was frozen except for a small circle around his brother's chest.

Upon closer inspection, Wangji's ears and entire face were red and Lan Xichen grinned. *Wangji was embarrassed!*

Lan Qiren huffed and unfroze the water, announcing their presence. Lan Xichen divested himself of his robes and rushed into the pond, delighted as he glided over to his brother, whose expression had swiftly soured into a pout.

Feeling playful, Lan Xichen tweaked his brother's cheeks and laughed as Wangji scowled.

"Xichen, do not roughhouse in the springs," Lan Qiren chided as he settled near them.

"Yes, Shufu," Lan Xichen replied, then sank into the water until it reached his chest. It was cool and refreshing, and Lan Xichen let out a relieved groan when the aches in his back and hands faded away.

"Wangji, did something happen?" Lan Xichen asked after sitting in silence for a while. "With Wei Wuxian, perhaps?"

A moment passed, and then the entire pond froze around them.

"Wangji!" Lan Qiren scolded while Lan Xichen bubbled with laughter; Wangji hadn't left any water unfrozen this time, which meant Lan Xichen had the joy of seeing his brother and uncle's hair frozen in the ice, making movement impossible.

Lan Xichen's own hair was frozen too, and it crackled in a pleasant way when his laughing tugged at where his hair was stuck. Wangji's ears turned deep red, and Lan Xichen grinned as he melted the ice and shifted closer to him.

"Ah, didi, you can tell your brother what happened," Lan Xichen offered. Wangji hastily looked away, realized Lan Qiren was on his other side, then ducked his head towards the water, his hair falling forward to hide his face.

"Did he break the rules again?" Lan Qiren asked with a sigh.

Wangji shook his head.

"Wei Ying is good."

Lan Xichen smiled, drifting closer. "Then why is he not here with you?"

"Xichen!" Lan Qiren said at the same time Wangji's head snapped up and he let out a panicked whine.

"There is no rule against having a same-gender spouse with you in the cold springs," Lan Xichen said. "So why are you here without him—"

Lan Xichen ducked when Wangji abruptly slapped his tail against the water and sent up a spray.

"I…" Wangji faltered, and Xichen held back another tease. Words did not come easily to Wangji, and it was one thing to lightly tease him, but quite another to push him until he couldn't respond.

And so Lan Xichen patiently waited until Wangji found his words.

"Wei Ying is not A-Yuan's father."

Wait, what?

Lan Xichen stilled, wondering if he had heard Wangji wrong. Wangji didn't correct himself, however, and Lan Xichen made an inquisitive noise at the same time as his uncle.

"Then whose child…?" Lan Xichen asked, mind spinning. *Perhaps A-Yuan was adopted?* Many children had been left without parents after the war; something the Lan accounted for by having palace children stay in the nursery.

But not every sect had communal places to raise orphans, and it was widely known that the Jiang had adopted Wei Wuxian himself, even if not in an official capacity.

"Wei Ying's."

Lan Xichen's lips twitched and Lan Qiren let out an exasperated sigh. "Wangji, be clear with your words. Are you suggesting that Wei Yuan was adopted?"

“No.”

“But if Wei Wuxian is not his father, then how—”

“Wei Ying is his mother.”

Out of all the explanations Lan Xichen had been expecting, it hadn’t been *that.* Baffled, Lan Xichen watched as Wangji looked between Lan Xichen and their uncle as if his words made perfect sense.

Lan Xichen hesitantly cleared his throat.

“Wei Wuxian isn’t a woman, correct? So how could he carry a child?”

Wangji sunk lower into the water, refusing to answer.

Exasperated, Lan Xichen had to gently coax his brother into responding, and then listened with growing surprise as Wangji explained that Wei Wuxian’s powers extended to changing his physical form.

Lan Qiren paled, sharing a heavy look with Lan Xichen.

“So during the marriage negotiations, Madam Yu…,” Lan Qiren began, furrowing his brow.

“Mn,” Wangji confirmed.

Lan Xichen felt the absurd need to laugh, suddenly grateful that he hadn’t known what Madam Yu had been referring to during the meetings.

“Wait, doesn’t that mean that Wei Wuxian—” Lan Qiren paused, looking like he had swallowed a sour plum. “—carried his son *during* the war?”

The distressed rumble Wangji made was confirmation enough.

They sat in the heavy silence of that revelation for a few moments, and then Lan Xichen forced a smile, glancing at Wangji.

“Well, if nothing else, this is good news,” he lightly said. “Isn’t it, Wangji?”

Wangji frowned, tilting his head.

“Because it means you could have your own little ones,” Lan Xichen said, chuckling when Lan Qiren let out a scandalized *Xichen!*

It was worth Lan Qiren’s chastisement to watch Wangji’s entire face turn red with surprise before he rushed out of the water and fled the springs, as if Lan Xichen had suggested they try for a second child right now. It sent Lan Xichen into peals of laughter, and he almost couldn’t breathe through his delight.

It didn't help that Lan Qiren looked more and more scandalized by the moment, unable to form an appropriate response as he pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned.

Lan Xichen eventually stifled his laughter so they could finish their soak. When they stepped out, however, Lan Xichen pulled on his robes and turned to his uncle with a smile.

"Shufu, do you think their children would be kits or hatchlings?" Lan Xichen innocently asked, then collapsed into himself laughing when Lan Qiren slipped in surprise and fell back into the pond.

***

When Wen Qing deemed Wei Wuxian's tails sufficiently healed, Wei Wuxian sprawled over the table in his rooms and crooned with joy, immediately hiding his tails.

"Finally," Wei Wuxian whined, much to Wen Qing's amusement. "Carrying around so many tails all the time is *heavy."*

"Aren't you a cultivator who can easily carry twice as much if he wanted to?" Wen Qing blankly asked. Wei Wuxian glared, about to respond when he realized that Lan Wangji—who had been sitting beside Wen Qing during her assessment—was suspiciously silent.

"Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji's tail twitched and he looked away, refusing to meet Wei Wuxian's gaze.

"Husband?" Wei Wuxian tried, grinning when Lan Wangji's ears turned red. Wen Qing sighed, muttered something about not doing this in front of her, then left with a pointed reminder not to do anything that could re-injure his tails.

Lan Wangji still didn't respond, and so Wei Wuxian moved into his line of sight. Lan Wangji huffed and turned his head the other way. Delighted, Wei Wuxian stepped into view again and bit his lip to hold back his laughter when Lan Wangji turned his head away yet again.

Ah, so easy to tease.

With a grin, Wei Wuxian slid into Lan Wangji's lap and wrapped his arms around his neck.

"Why won't you look at me, Husband?" Wei Wuxian whispered, and then froze when Lan Wangji firmly wrapped his hands around his waist.

"I do not like when Wei Ying hides himself," Lan Wangji said as he finally met Wei Wuxian's gaze. His hands tightened around Wei Wuxian's waist, fingers strong and sturdy in a way that made Wei Wuxian's stomach twist.

And then Lan Wangji brushed a hand over the base of Wei Wuxian's back where his tails should be and Wei Wuxian gasped, shivering through a sudden wave of desire that had him hiding his face against Lan Wangji's chest.

Lan Wangji repeated the movement with a soft rumble, and the resulting shivers were abruptly too much for Wei Wuxian to handle.

“Y-You should have just told me,” Wei Wuxian stuttered, revealing his tails as he scrambled from Lan Wangji’s lap, face burning. Lan Wangji let out a pleased hum, and then Mo Xuanyu interrupted as he called from the other room that their bath was ready and that A-Yuan was asking for them.

Wei Wuxian hurried after Mo Xuanyu, eager to put space between Lan Wangji and himself until the fluttery feeling engulfing him subsided.

After everyone had finished bathing, A-Yuan roped Mo Xuanyu into joining them as they combed their hair in Lan Wangji’s room.

Mo Xuanyu had tried protesting, but A-Yuan had simply stamped his foot, puffed his cheeks, and dragged Mo Xuanyu’s nest from its new spot beside Lan Wangji’s bed into the middle of the room where they were combing their hair.

Mo Xuanyu had turned red, buried his face in his hands, then reluctantly climbed into the nest. A-Yuan sat in his lap, handed Mo Xuanyu a comb, then insisted that Wei Wuxian make sure Mo Xuanyu’s hair received proper attention.

Both Mo Xuanyu and A-Yuan fell asleep by the time they finished, A-Yuan curled in Mo Xuanyu’s lap and Mo Xuanyu buried in his nest. Wei Wuxian smiled fondly and tucked Mo Xuanyu in deeper, letting out a soft purr.

It reminded him of the times when he was younger and had cajoled both Jiang Cheng and Shijie into a nest, relishing in their warmth and comforting scents before Jiang-Shushu found them and carried them to their own beds.

With the others taken care off, Wei Wuxian let Lan Wangji comb his hair, enjoying the gentle silence that filled the room as Lan Wangji carefully combed through each knot and tangle.

Wei Wuxian had almost fallen asleep himself by the time Lan Wangji finished, and so he almost missed it when Lan Wangji spoke.

“Would Wei Ying want to visit Caiyi tomorrow?”

“Do we need to meet with someone there?” Wei Wuxian asked with a yawn, flexing his ears forward as Lan Wangji huffed in amusement. Another moment and Lan Wangji’s hands returned to Wei Wuxian’s hair, deftly picking strands from Wei Wuxian’s ears and putting them in their proper place.

“En.” Lan Wangji said. “I promised Wei Ying we would go to Caiyi for a dizi. Our schedule is open tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Wei Wuxian said, swallowing his knee-jerk reaction to deny that he needed anything. *He was allowed this.* He leaned into Lan Wangji’s touch. “That would be nice.”

The rest of the evening passed until they carried A-Yuan and Mo Xuanyu to bed and parted ways at the doors connecting their rooms. Lan Wangji bid Wei Wuxian goodnight, and Wei Wuxian curled his hand into his robes, resisting the sudden urge to ask Lan Wangji if he could join him.

Because he wasn't sure whether he could keep his hands off his husband if he was allowed into his bed.

Which wasn't exactly a problem—they *were* married after all—but the thought of Lan Wangji returning Wei Wuxian's interest made Wei Wuxian shy away, unsure whether he could handle the intensity of his emotions.

Sleeping without Lan Wangji's scent and comforting warmth felt hollow, however, and Wei Wuxian slept fitfully that night.

In the morning, Lan Wangji woke Wei Wuxian with a quiet '*Wei Ying, it is time to be awake.'*

It was assuredly *not* time to be awake, and Wei Wuxian groaned and complained until Lan Wangji sighed and let him sleep for another shichen.

The second time Lan Wangji woke Wei Wuxian, he did so by pulling the covers off him and unceremoniously dragging him from the bed.

"I'm awake, I'm awake!" Wei Wuxian lamented from the floor, lying face-down as his tails twitched in agitation.

"Baba, lying on the floor isn't awake," A-Yuan said, apparently having joined Lan Wangji in trying to wake him.

Wei Wuxian mourned the fact that his son took to the Lan sleeping schedule without issue.

"How do you know, baobei? This is the best spot to attack little kits who wake their baba too early," Wei Wuxian said, then rolled over and scooped A-Yuan into his arms, burying his face in his stomach and blowing raspberries.

A-Yuan flailed in protest, giggling and calling for Lan Wangji until he plucked A-Yuan from Wei Wuxian's arms and sent A-Yuan running into the next room.

"Enough," Lan Wangji said as his tailed flicked in amusement. "Wei Ying should dress. Breakfast is waiting and then we may leave."

"Alright, Lan Zhan, I'll get ready," Wei Wuxian replied. Lan Wangji nodded then left, closing the door behind him.

The thought of a warm, spice-filled breakfast spurred Wei Wuxian to dress quickly, and he pulled on the new robes Lan Wangji had gifted him, only hesitating for a moment in front of his bronze mirror before joining the others for breakfast.

Once they finished eating, Mo Xuanyu headed with A-Yuan to the nursery, leaving Wei Wuxian to nervously wait for Lan Wangji to finish clearing the table.

Lan Wangji took his time, stacking the dishes for a servant to collect before he gathered his sword and secured it against his belt. Then he picked up suibian and handed it to Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian frowned as he tied suibian to his belt. “Not that I’m complaining, but why do we need our swords?” He asked. “Won’t the guards be enough protection?”

“Not bringing guards,” Lan Wangji replied. “We are sufficient fighters and will not be alone. It will not be an issue.”

“Are you sure?” Wei Wuxian asked. He wasn’t particularly worried about being attacked again—he wouldn’t be so easily poisoned twice—but the thought of leaving the palace without guards made his stomach twist as if they were breaking a rule.

“Mn. Xiongzhang gave us permission.”

If the emperor said it was fine, then Wei Wuxian wasn’t going to argue. Instead, he enjoyed the way suibian brushed against his clarity bell at his waist—a combination he hadn’t felt for months.

Satisfied, Wei Wuxian excitedly shifted on his feet as he waited for Lan Wangji to tuck a money purse into his sleeves. Only then did Lan Wangji say they could leave, and Wei Wuxian grinned as they left and headed for the palace gates.

Wei Wuxian was excited enough that he didn’t notice the odd looks the palace cultivators and servants gave him as they passed. That is, he didn’t notice until the guards at the palace entrance gave him a wary look as they reluctantly stepped aside so they could leave.

Wei Wuxian glanced back at the guards as they walked from the gates, biting his lip. “You’re sure I’m allowed to leave the palace?”

Lan Wangji paused in his steps, furrowing his brow. “Wei Ying is allowed to leave whenever he wants,” Lan Wangji replied. “He is not a prisoner.”

“I was just checking,” Wei Wuxian quickly said, leaning close to Lan Wangji with a forced smile. “No need to make that face. The guards didn’t seem pleased to see me go, that’s all.”

Which was apparently the wrong thing to say, because Lan Wangji’s expression shuttered and he turned around, heading back toward the guards and leaving a trail of frost in his wake.

Shit.

“Aiya, Lan Zhan, it’s fine!”

Lan Wangji didn’t stop, however, and the guards paled as Lan Wangji advanced. Wei Wuxian cursed under his breath and darted in front of Lan Wangji, holding up his hands.

“I’m sure it was nothing!” Wei Wuxian said. “Everyone usually looks like they’re mad at me, so it’s no big deal.”

The frost covering the ground grew, and Wei Wuxian nervously took a step back as Lan Wangji's face darkened.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji stepped closer, his gaze intense. "I am warning you."

Wei Wuxian blinked, unable to form a response before Lan Wangji reached out and brushed his hand against the side of Wei Wuxian's face.

"You do not deserve to be treated unkindly."

Wei Wuxian spluttered as his face grew warm, unable to do anything but watch as Lan Wangji withdrew his hand and stalked over to the guards. Wei Wuxian's heart raced and he clutched the front of his robes, willing it to calm down.

The guards let out a quiet *eep!* as Lan Wangji towered over them and demanded to know their issue with his husband.

"W-We have no issue!" The one guard cried, his gaze focused on the ground as if it might swallow him whole and save him. The other guard nodded along, insisting that there wasn't a problem.

"It is forbidden to lie," Lan Wangji replied. "You will copy the first book of rules as punishment."

"But we didn't—"

"You will copy them twice for your persistence."

Both guards looked close to crying.

Wei Wuxian joined Lan Wangji, keeping his voice light. "Lan Zhan, there's no need for such punishment."

The way Lan Wangji's mouth pulled into the smallest frown indicated that he disagreed and Wei Wuxian sighed, shaking his head.

"Why did you two look displeased to see me leave?" Wei Wuxian asked, ignoring the way Lan Wangji tensed beside him. The guards frantically shook their heads.

"We were not displeased, Taizi-fei," one guard said, and Wei Wuxian barely managed to keep a straight face at being addressed as the crown prince's *wife.*

"We were merely…" The guards shared a look. "…concerned about your features."

Wei Wuxian's tails twitched at the mention and he immediately made them vanish, his breath catching. *He had almost—*

"This one thanks you for the reminder," Wei Wuxian quietly said, giving a short bow to the guards. He had gotten used to having his features showing, but it was one thing to walk around the palace with them visible and quite another to traipse around Caiyi.

Lan Wangji, however, looked displeased.

“It’s alright, Lan Zhan, I can’t go to Caiyi with my features showing. No one would be alright with seeing a *huli jing*,” Wei Wuxian said.

Lan Wangji lashed his tail, petulantly dropping his gaze to the ground.

“It is not fair.”

“It isn’t anything I’m not used to,” Wei Wuxian replied, then tugged on Lan Wangji’s sleeve and waved at the guards. “Come on, it’s fine. I never showed them in Lotus Pier either.”

But Lan Wangji refused to move. Wei Wuxian pulled harder on his sleeve to no avail, then tried walking away to see if Lan Wangji would follow.

He didn’t.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian sighed, exasperated.

“Wei Ying should be able to show his features.”

“What I want doesn’t matter,” Wei Wuxian countered, doing his best not to flinch at how bitter the words came out, repeating what Madam Yu had whipped into his back as she reminded him of *how little he was worth for Lotus Pier to have taken him in.*

“Wei Ying should have anything he wants,” Lan Wangji insisted, closing the distance between them until they were close enough for Wei Wuxian to count the flecks of gold in Lan Wangji’s eyes. Close enough that Wei Wuxian held his breath, unable to break the sudden tension filling the air.

“Wei Ying should show his features,” Lan Wangji said. “It does not matter if others disagree.”

And then Lan Wangji reached out and trailed a hand over Wei Wuxian’s hair where his fox ears would be, his expression turning soft.

“Because they are a part of Wei Ying, and Wei Ying is good.”

One of the guards coughed, and Wei Wuxian jerked away as he remembered they had an audience. Both guards looked extremely uncomfortable and had their eyes locked on the ground.

Wei Wuxian clenched his hands then stepped away from Lan Wangji, putting enough space between them so he could think.

“The people of Caiyi did not welcome me when I arrived for our wedding,” Wei Wuxian began, avoiding Lan Wangji’s gaze. “They were not happy to see a *huli jing* wed to Hanguang-jun.”

“Wei Ying, that is not—”

“We are bad omens,” Wei Wuxian continued, finally looking at Lan Wangji. He appeared stricken; a hand half-raised as if reaching for Wei Wuxian.

“That you believe differently will not change their minds. The Wen hunted us down for a reason, after all.”

Wei Wuxian forced himself to breathe in the resulting silence.

His throat felt tight, the weight of his words thick and heavy, wrapping around his neck in a vice that he couldn’t shake. Pulling his stomach to the ground and twisting dark claws into his chest, quiet but deadly.

“Wei Ying is sure?” Lan Wangji asked, dropping his outstretched hand. His voice sounded small, quiet and feeble in a way that screamed *something was wrong*, but Wei Wuxian forced himself to nod regardless.

“It’s for the best.”

Lan Wangji stiffly nodded, then turned and thanked the guards before striding past Wei Wuxian and away from the palace.

Wei Wuxian could do nothing but follow, mired in tension as he jogged to catch up.

Chapter End Notes

I have absolutely *no idea* how wwx hasn't been ravaged by lwj yet. Don't look at me like that, lwj is trying his best. Which isn't saying much considering what's going to happen in the next chapter, BUT HE'S TRYING OKAY.

And yes, not that you asked but lqr later that evening realized that wwx having a female form meant that csr had a male form. He proceeded to panic and absolutely *did not* think about how handsome she would've been.

Extra:
Madam Yu: -negotiates for a higher bride price because wwx can still have children-
LQR: ???
LXC: ???
Lans: -goes along with it anyway despite having absolutely no idea what she's talking about-

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> Please enjoy this 9k monster that I wrote while chanting "Caiyi trip! Caiyi trip!" like a cackling mad-person.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The trip to Caiyi was quick when one took the main roads.

It was also quiet.

Lan Wangji stayed half a step ahead of Wei Wuxian the entire time, his displeasure clear in the way he walked with a hand clenched tightly around bichen's hilt

Wei Wuxian had tried several times to lighten the mood, only to flounder when Lan Wangji didn't respond.

It wasn't until they reached the entrance to Caiyi that Lan Wangji stopped and turned to face Wei Wuxian.

"Wei Ying is certain he will not show his features?" Lan Wangji asked, his expression hopeful.

"I really can't," Wei Wuxian replied, then stiffened when Lan Wangji suddenly closed the distance between them.

"I will not force you," Lan Wangji murmured. "But I will endeavor to change their minds so Wei Ying may be himself one day," he added, then leaned forward and brushed his cheek against Wei Wuxian's head, marking him like one would a kit.

Wei Wuxian flushed and touched his head, his nose swimming in Lan Wangji's scent. *Did he just—*

Lan Wangji's lips twitched upwards as let out a quiet huff.

Wei Wuxian spluttered, pointing at Lan Wangji accusingly. "Was that a laugh?"

Lan Wangji didn't respond, but merely blinked slowly as he swished his tail.

"That *was* a laugh!" Wei Wuxian playfully wailed, then latched onto Lan Wangji's robes. "I didn't enjoy it properly, do it again!"

Lan Wangji stayed silent.

“Husband!” Wei Wuxian tried, then pressed himself closer when Lan Wangji didn’t respond. Wei Wuxian poked the corner of Lan Wangji’s mouth, hoping for another reaction when Lan Wangji abruptly wrapped his arms around Wei Wuxian’s waist and swung him to the side.

“Wei Ying, let us continue,” Lan Wangji said as he released Wei Wuxian, who was trying not to think too hard about the casual display of strength. Flustered, Wei Wuxian laughed and waved a hand.

“Alright, lead the way then.”

Lan Wangji nodded then headed into Caiyi, looking significantly calmer as Wei Wuxian followed and starting rambling about his prior trips.

It wasn’t until they stepped into an expensive-looking instrument shop that Wei Wuxian remembered why they had come to Caiyi, and he stepped in front of Lan Wangji with a thin smile.

“We should go somewhere else, Lan Zhan. I don’t need something expensive.”

The shop’s walls were covered in only the finest wares: erhu with flowers carved into their stocks, guqin decorated with intricate designs, and dizi in varying shades of jade crowded the store.

The craftsmanship spoke of a price that few could afford, not to mention how the storeowner was dressed in fine robes.

Instead of leaving, however, Lan Wangji stared at Wei Wuxian with a furrowed brow.

“We will buy a dizi here. Wei Ying deserves nice things,” Lan Wangji replied, as if that necessitated spending what looked to be at minimum a standard month’s wages before he turned and greeted the storeowner.

Exasperated, Wei Wuxian could only watch as the storeowner rushed over to introduce himself, waxing poetic about how grateful he was for the crown prince to visit his shop.

“I expect you’re looking for a guqin then?” The storeowner asked, already guiding Lan Wangji toward elaborate ones resting against the far wall. “Lan cultivators don’t come here often, but our guqin are as fine as any palace crafter's!”

Lan Wangji threw Wei Wuxian a panicked look and Wei Wuxian snorted, waiting to see what’d happen before he stepped in.

“My husband can be a bit of a talker,” a higher-pitched voice said, and Wei Wuxian turned to see a woman with grey feathers in her hair giving the storeowner an amused look. “Once he gets started, there’s no stopping him,” she added with a fond sigh.

“This one is Madam Huang. May I assume you’re not here for a guqin?” she asked.

“We’re not. We’re looking for a dizi,” Wei Wuxian replied, carefully skirting around an introduction. Thankfully, Madam Huang merely nodded and went after her husband. She

smoothly inserted herself into the conversation, gesturing toward Wei Wuxian as she mentioned their interest in a dizi.

Her husband laughed, looking flustered as he led Lan Wangji away from the guqin and toward the dizi on display.

“Of course, your highness, one should not assume you’d only play one instrument,” the storeowner said, plastering on a strained smile. “May I suggest a jade dizi for one such as yourself?”

Lan Wangji pursed his lips and Wei Wuxian did his best to stifle a laugh as Lan Wangji opened his mouth to speak without success. Because the storeowner kept talking, allowing no room to respond as he lifted several dizi in various shades of blue and white onto a table and launched into explanations for why each would be suitable.

Leaving Lan Wangji to the man’s clutches, Wei Wuxian drifted toward a series of bamboo dizi ranging in colors from light brown to almost black. They looked lighter weight than the jade dizi, and Wei Wuxian lifted one to feel its weight and run his fingers along its length.

“Ah, gongzi, as nice as our bamboo dizi are, they are not as fine as our jade ones, especially for someone such as the crown prince,” the storeowner interjected, motioning to Wei Wuxian to set the dizi down.

“The dizi is not for me,” Lan Wangji stated and the storeowner spluttered, almost dropping a jade one. “It is for him.” Lan Wangji nodded toward Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian grinned when Madam Huang softly laughed and her husband’s face turned red.

“O-Of course it is. But a Lan-gongzi such as yourself surely doesn’t want a bamboo dizi,” the storeowner argued, switching gears without issue. “They’re not nearly as elegant as the jade ones; entirely unsuitable to ones such as your honored selves.”

Wei Wuxian paused, pretending to think about it before he tapped a bamboo dizi.

“Hm, no. I’d like to try a few bamboo ones.”

The storeowner’s expression twitched. He started protesting, but paused when Lan Wangji leveled him with a minute frown. Within seconds the storeowner stepped forward and laid out a few bamboo dizi in front of Wei Wuxian, encouraging him to try each one to see how their tones differed.

Each dizi was beautiful, but the first few Wei Wuxian tried sounded wrong. Their tones were too light, almost fluttery, and Wei Wuxian set each once down with a grimace, missing how the storeowner’s smile became more strained with each passing moment.

Wei Wuxian considered the other options, then lifted one that was a such a deep red that it was almost black. There were tiny birds carved across the body, and when Wei Wuxian trilled a few notes they sounded heavy and full, thick in a way that curled pleasantly through his chest.

“We will take that one,” Lan Wangji said without hesitation.

Wei Wuxian startled, snapping his head toward Lan Wangji. “I didn’t say I wanted this one!”

Lan Wangji tilted his head, swishing his tail.

“It suits Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian flushed, then glanced at the price marked where the dizi had rested before hurriedly setting it down.

“This is too much,” Wei Wuxian said, swallowing the uneasiness making its home in his chest. *He couldn’t take more than he was worth—*

“It is not,” Lan Wangji insisted, gesturing for the storeowner to take the dizi.

“But Lan Zhan—”

“Wei Ying is worth it,” Lan Wangji said as he held Wei Wuxian’s gaze. Wei Wuxian stifled a denial and stepped to Lan Wangji’s side, face heating as he reluctantly nodded and murmured thanks.

Lan Wangji seemed to preen at the acceptance, then led them after the storeowner to pay.

As they waited for the storeowner to wrap the dizi and take their information, Lan Wangji nodded toward a large selection of tassels.

“Does Wei Ying want a tassel?”

Wei Wuxian eyed tassels then shrugged.

“I don’t need one to play,” Wei Wuxian said; the dizi was expensive enough itself. Lan Wangji *mn’d,* then scanned the tassels before picking out a deep blue one.

“This one then,” Lan Wangji said as he handed the tassel to the storeowner. It matched Wei Wuxian’s outer robes, and Wei Wuxian winced at the expense when Lan Wangji paid and asked for everything to be sent back to the palace.

The sun was high in the sky when they left the store, and despite his lingering worry over the expense for the dizi, the smells drifting from the food stalls reminded Wei Wuxian that he hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

It was surprisingly easy to cajole Lan Wangji into buying food.

Wei Wuxian picked out a few meat skewers for himself and a bean paste bun for Lan Wangji. But when he tried paying Lan Wangji rumbled and stepped in front of Wei Wuxian, swiftly pulling out a coin purse and paying before Wei Wuxian could protest.

Wei Wuxian huffed and shoved the bun into Lan Wangji’s hand before biting into a meat skewer. *Stubborn man.*

The taste of juicy meat and spices thoroughly distracted Wei Wuxian, and he devoured an entire skewer before coming up for air. Only then did Wei Wuxian pause, surreptitiously glancing at Lan Wangji as they walked.

Wei Wuxian wanted to see whether Lan Wangji could eat his bun without smearing bean paste over his lips—*paste that Wei Wuxian could wipe away*—but to his disappointment Lan Wangji was as clean an eater as ever.

Wei Wuxian lamented his woes as he finished his second skewer.

"If only these were spicier," Wei Wuxian commented. They were dripping with fat and full of flavor, but it was nothing compared to the violently red skewers he was used to.

"The ones at Lotus Pier are much better." Wei Wuxian took another bite. "I'll have to take you there sometime to show you what proper food tastes like."

"Mn," Lan Wangji hummed and finished his bun, then handed Wei Wuxian two more skewers. Wei Wuxian paused, looking at Lan Wangji in surprise. *When had he…?*

"Wei Ying is too thin."

Wei Wuxian scoffed and snatched the new skewers, gesturing to himself.

"This is all muscle!"

Lan Wangji stared, then reached out and pinched Wei Wuxian's waist.

"Lan Zhan!"

"Mn, too thin," Lan Wangji stated as if he wasn't bullying his husband, then continued walking with his hands tucked behind his back, leaving Wei Wuxian rushing to catch up as his face burned.

Lan Wangji's expression hadn't changed, but his tail lazily swung behind him as they continued wandering the stalls. He was clearly pleased with himself, and it wasn't until Wei Wuxian had begun eating the final skewer before he paused long enough to ask Lan Wangji if he wanted any.

"En, they are for Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said, then reached into his sleeves and pulled out a small cloth after Wei Wuxian devoured the final skewer. "Clean yourself."

"I am the epitome of clean!" Wei Wuxian protested, waving around the empty skewers.

Lan Wangji sternly glared, gesturing to his hands and face.

Only then did Wei Wuxian notice his hands were covered in spices, and that his face was likely the same. He flushed and snatched the cloth from Lan Wangji, cleaning himself as he muttered under his breath.

Once clean, Wei Wuxian threw away the empty skewers before they continued. He was familiar with most of the stalls' wares by now, but it was fun to watch Lan Wangji drift around the market, eyes alight with interest.

They eventually passed the stall selling tassels that Wei Wuxian had seen before, and he faintly wondered whether the one he had liked was still there.

He felt the strong urge to buy it for Lan Wangji if it was.

"Lan Zhan, could you get me a stick of *tanghulu*?" Wei Wuxian asked as he pointed to a stall farther into the market. "I need to buy a few talisman supplies, so I can meet up with you once I'm done."

"Wei Ying will be alright alone?" Lan Wangji asked as he stopped walking, brows furrowed with concern.

"Of course! I've been here before, remember?" Wei Wuxian said.

"Wei Ying was attacked before," Lan Wangji countered and Wei Wuxian spluttered.

"That's not—I didn't have suibian with me last time. I'll be more than fine by myself, and will catch up to you soon."

Lan Wangji considered his words, shifting on his feet before he reluctantly nodded and disappeared into the crowd.

Wei Wuxian actually *did* need some talisman supplies, and so he slipped into a store quickly before making his way to the tassel stall.

As he scanned their wares, he was surprised to see the tassel from before was still there, the deep blue jade spinning in the wind as the flowers carved into its face shone in the light.

Wei Wuxian was reaching for the tassel when a laugh startled him.

"You've returned!" The stall owner said in greeting as he stepped forward. "Did your wife allow you to return with spending money?"

"That she has," Wei Wuxian grinned, playing along as he chatted amicably with the stall owner and paid for the tassel before tucking it into his sleeve for later.

He paused before walking away, however, taking a moment to ask the owner what the flowers carved into the tassel were.

"Oh those? They're gentians," the owner replied, his expression turning solemn. "They were rumored to be the late empress's favorite. Not many are still willing to buy them after what happened," the owner sighed.

"I've had that one for several years. You're doing me a favor by taking it off my hands."

Wei Wuxian thanked him then made his way over to the *tanghulu* stall to join Lan Wangji, except that Lan Wangji wasn't at the stall. The owner insisted that he hadn't seen the crown prince, and so Wei Wuxian wandered around the nearby stalls trying to find him.

After a quarter shichen, Wei Wuxian had resorted to asking random people if they had seen the crown prince. No one had, and Wei Wuxian was starting to question how hard it was to spot a dragon when an elderly bao stall owner patted his hand and said that they had seen the crown prince over in a small clearing.

Wei Wuxian thanked the man then hurried to where he had pointed, and found Lan Wangji standing in the middle of a clearing completely surrounded by a herd of children.

They excitedly ran around Lan Wangji, cheering that they had never seen a dragon before as they latched onto his robes. The younger ones squealed at how soft Lan Wangji's robes were, their ears and tails twitching in delight.

Some older kids were crouched around Lan Wangji's tail as they worked up the courage to touch it. *Make it move!* They chanted, and when Lan Wangji's tail twitched the entire group chittered.

Emboldened, the children pounced upon Lan Wangji's tail, causing him to lift it from the ground and inadvertently bring the children with it.

Wei Wuxian was trying to hold back his amusement, then dissolved into a fit of laughter when he finally looked at Lan Wangji's face, holding his sides as he wheezed.

Because Lan Wangji looked absolutely *terrified,* eyes wide with panic and arms held stiffly at his sides. The kids seemed to take this as a challenge, however, and Wei Wuxian howled when they began latching onto Lan Wangji's arms with whoops and hollers.

Wei Wuxian only composed himself when Lan Wangji let out a distressed whine. The kids gasped in awe and prodded at Lan Wangji to do it again, and Wei Wuxian strode forward as he caught sight of Lan Wangji's breath stuttering.

"Okay, okay, that's enough you menaces!" Wei Wuxian chided, shooing away the kids and plucking off the stubborn ones. By this point a crowd had gathered, and Wei Wuxian watched in amusement as the kids were collected by their scolding parents.

And then one of the parents recognized Lan Wangji, paled, and bowed low as she apologized for her children. The other parents were quick to do the same, and Wei Wuxian glanced at the ground when he felt his feet grow cold.

Frost was spreading across the dirt, and Wei Wuxian hurriedly waved his hands at the parents.

"It's alright," Wei Wuxian insisted, mindful of Lan Wangji's distress. "Nothing the crown prince isn't used to."

Wei Wuxian repeated himself a few more times until the parents were appeased. They bowed again before cuffing their kid's heads and dragging them away.

With nothing left to see the crowd dispersed, and Wei Wuxian stepped close to Lan Wangji.

His breathing was shaky, ice crawling over his skin and hands balled into fists at his sides. Minute shivers racked through him, and Wei Wuxian raised his hands to run them over his shoulders, only to hesitate when Lan Wangji flinched at the incoming touch.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian gently asked, but Lan Wangji didn't respond. Frowning, Wei Wuxian held his wrist under Lan Wangji's nose, making sure not to touch him in the process.

After a moment Lan Wangji shuddered, nostrils flaring as he closed his eyes and leaned into Wei Wuxian's hand. His skin felt cold from the ice, but it slowly warmed as the ice melted and Lan Wangji's breathing settled.

"Better?" Wei Wuxian asked as Lan Wangji opened his eyes and softly nodded.

"Did Wei Ying…" Lan Wangji began, searching for his words. "…get what he needed?"

"I did."

"I did not have time to get *tanghulu,"* Lan Wangji said, looking away with a frown. "The children pulled me away in their excitement."

"It's alright. We can get some together," Wei Wuxian reassured him, then gently guided Lan Wangji back to the *tanghulu* stand.

Lan Wangji wasn't interested in the *tanghulu* himself, but his eyes strayed toward the other candies at the stall. There were a variety of hard sweets in different colors, and Lan Wangji's gaze lingered on some honey candies that were shaped like bunnies.

Before Lan Wangji could tuck his money purse back into his sleeves, Wei Wuxian plucked it from his hand, delighted when Lan Wangji didn't try to stop him. He bought a small pouch of honey candies and handed them to Lan Wangji.

"I can't be the only one to enjoy sweets," Wei Wuxian chuckled as he waved his *tanghulu* around. When Lan Wangji made no move to eat any of the candies, Wei Wuxian plucked one from the bag and lifted it to Lan Wangji's lips.

"Here."

Lan Wangji's ears turned red and his eyes widened. Wei Wuxian waited for him to eat the candy, and then blushed when Lan Wangji didn't move and he realized how forward he was being.

But before he could pull away in embarrassment, Lan Wangji leaned forward and ate the candy from Wei Wuxian's fingers, humming that it was good.

Wei Wuxian resolutely did not think about how soft Lan Wangji's lips were against his fingers, nor about how *they might taste covered in the sticky candy, warm and sweet, that they might yield to Wei Wuxian's own—*

Wei Wuxian abruptly bit into his *tanghulu* to distract himself, willing away the heat from his cheeks and praying that Lan Wangji hadn't noticed.

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When the sun set, Wei Wuxian led Lan Wangji to his favorite inn to have an actual meal.

The inn was bustling when they stepped inside, but they managed to be seated with little fuss on the far side of the inn and away from the majority of the crowd. The pipa woman was playing on stage again, and Wei Wuxian was relieved to see that most of the patrons were too distracted by her to notice Lan Wangji.

They hadn't been waiting long when the waitress—whose name Wei Wuxian *still* couldn't remember—wound her way over to greet them.

"Hello good sir, you haven't traveled here in a while," she said. "Here I'd thought that you…" The woman paused, looking Wei Wuxian over.

"Did you join the Lan sect?" She asked, gesturing to his robes.

Wei Wuxian chuckled and waved a hand. "You could say that," he replied, ignoring the glare he could feel Lan Wangji sending his way. "What better way than to taste the food here more often?"

"You flatter us!" The waitress chuckled, then finally seemed to realize Wei Wuxian wasn't alone. "And you brought someone with you? Is he your—"

The waitress stilled, her eyes going wide before she dipped into a proper bow.

"Forgive this one, your highness, for not greeting you sooner."

Lan Wangji pouted and Wei Wuxian covered his mouth to stifle a laugh. The waitress's smile grew strained, and before Wei Wuxian could intervene Lan Wangji murmured thanks and told her to be at ease.

The waitress seemed skeptical as she placed her hands on her hips, throwing Wei Wuxian a sharp look. "You might have warned me," she chided. "But I suppose I'll allow it, as a royal guard likely wouldn't want to announce his highness's presence in such a crowd."

"Not a guard."

The waitress glanced at Lan Wangji.

"Husband," Lan Wangji stated with a small nod, and Wei Wuxian flushed at the sincerity in his tone.

“Husband?” The waitress echoed, then gasped and lightly smacked Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. “You didn’t mention you were married,” she accused, her rabbit ears twitching. “And to the crown prince, no less!”

“You never asked,” Wei Wuxian quipped, and the waitress puffed her cheeks and smacked him again.

“I shouldn’t have had to ask!” She hissed, then paled and took a few steps back.

“I hit the prince’s spouse,” she whispered, then fell into a deep bow toward Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian scrambled from his seat, rushing to reassure her there was no harm done.

But she wouldn’t rise, and then shied away when Lan Wangji let out a deep rumble.

“Lan Zhan, there’s no need to frighten her!” Wei Wuxian said. Lan Wangji huffed but stopped rumbling. Only then did the waitress let Wei Wuxian pull her from her bow before he returned to his seat.

“Well,” the woman began after clearing her throat, her eyes never quite landing on Lan Wangji. “I understand why you never showed your features.” She sighed wistfully. “But I imagine they’re quite beautiful.”

“Mn, they are,” Lan Wangji agreed. The waitress smiled, finally looking at Lan Wangji as she leaned close and shamelessly asked him what Wei Wuxian’s features looked like.

Wei Wuxian could only watch in growing horror as the waitress and his husband chatted amicably about his features, unaware of the way people at the nearest tables had started looking over with interest and confusion.

“Perhaps now isn’t the best time to discuss such things?” Wei Wuxian interrupted, flickering his eyes toward the other tables. “Many aren’t partial to my kind.”

The waitress *tsked*, muttering that if all *huli jing* were like Wei Wuxian, then no one would have a reason to fear them. Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, and Wei Wuxian dropped his head to the table with an embarrassed whine, trying to ignore the rising fear building in his chest.

Thankfully they let the topic drop, and Wei Wuxian changed the subject to ask Lan Wangji what he wanted to order.

Lan Wangji shook his head, insisting that Wei Wuxian order whatever he wanted. With a shrug, Wei Wuxian ordered several of the spiciest dishes and some Emperor’s Smile, throwing a grin at Lan Wangji when he furrowed his brow as the waitress left.

“What, we’re not in the Cloud Recesses anymore, are we?” Wei Wuxian asked, hoping that Lan Wangji’s insistence for Wei Wuxian to enjoy himself extended to breaking this palace rule.

Lan Wangji pursed his lips then sighed.

“We are not.”

“Then there should be no issue with me drinking alcohol, right? You did promise me some, after all,” Wei Wuxian grinned. Lan Wangji hesitated at that, looking away as his ears turned red and refusing to respond.

Wei Wuxian cackled, leaning across the table to poke Lan Wangji’s cheek.

“Lan Zhan, does that mean I can drink?” He repeated, only for Lan Wangji to turn farther away. Delighted, Wei Wuxian proceeded to tease his husband for an answer, and was still trying to needle a response when their food arrived.

The rich smells hit Wei Wuxian first, and he happily chittered as he pulled several steaming plates towards himself, piling a variety of food onto a plate before handing it to Lan Wangji.

“Here you go Lan Zhan, these are the best this place has to offer!” Wei Wuxian said. Lan Wangji slowly picked up his chopsticks and stared at the food, looking from it to Wei Wuxian.

“Don’t worry, there’s more than enough for the both of us,” Wei Wuxian reassured him as he piled food onto his own plate. He dug in while the food was still hot, letting out a pleased purr as the spices coated his tongue and warmth filled his stomach.

Wei Wuxian made short work of his plate, and was refilling it when he paused long enough to look at Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji was steadily working through each food on his plate, his cheeks lightly flushed, and Wei Wuxian was glad to see that Lan Wangji enjoyed the spicy dishes.

“There’s even spicier dishes in Lotus Pier,” Wei Wuxian said as he finished refilling his plate. “I’ll find you the spiciest ones when we visit since you like these dishes so much.”

Lan Wangji coughed, ears red, and covered his mouth with a sleeve before hastily pouring himself what looked like a thick soy drink and downing it in one go.

Realizing that their drinks had arrived without him noticing, Wei Wuxian poured himself some Emperor’s Smile.

“Lan Zhan, you should try some Emperor’s Smile, it pairs well with these dishes,” Wei Wuxian suggested, mostly joking. It was one thing for himself to get away with drinking, but surely Lan Wangji would abhor it, being from the main family.

“It is forbidden to drink alcohol,” Lan Wangji replied as he set his chopsticks down. Wei Wuxian pouted, leaning his face against his hand as he swirled his own drink around in a saucer.

“It’s forbidden *within* the palace walls. Surely having a small amount outside the palace wouldn’t hurt, even for you?” Wei Wuxian coaxed, not expecting Lan Wangji to agree. “Wouldn’t you like to join this husband in relaxing a bit?”

Wei Wuxian waited patiently while Lan Wangji considered the request, then snapped to attention when Lan Wangji sighed and help out a cup.

“Wait, really?” Wei Wuxian asked. Lan Wangji’s fingers twitched around his cup, but he didn’t move it. Delighted, Wei Wuxian poured him a small amount. “Emperor’s Smile is the best alcohol there is, you’re going to love it!”

Wei Wuxian held his breath as Lan Wangji eyed the cup like one might eye a venomous snake, waiting patiently as Lan Wangji tentatively took a sip.

Lan Wangji’s expression didn’t change as he swallowed—Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure whether that was a good or bad sign—and set the cup down. He blinked once, twice, then his eyes fluttered closed as he slumped ever so slightly forward.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked when Lan Wangji didn’t reopen his eyes. Lan Wangji didn’t respond, and Wei Wuxian scoffed as he leaned forward and gently tapped Lan Wangji’s arm.

Surely he wasn’t—

Lan Wangji let out a soft rumble, eyelids fluttering but refusing to open. The sound was quiet enough that Wei Wuxian barely heard it over the din of the inn, but it was surprisingly familiar.

It sounded like the noises Lan Wangji made on the rare occurrences in which he fell asleep after they’d had their evening bath and Wei Wuxian was still combing out his tails.

The process took long enough that when Lan Wangji wasn’t helping, Wei Wuxian usually didn’t finish until well after the palace’s enforced bedtime.

Which meant he had gotten to see Lan Wangji lose the battle against sleep before, and recognized that the sound meant that Lan Wangji had fallen asleep at the table.

“You can’t really be asleep,” Wei Wuxian said, mostly to himself as he moved around the table and sat beside Lan Wangji. He tried shaking his shoulder, but Lan Wangji stayed stubbornly asleep.

Wei Wuxian resigned himself to finishing his meal alone with the hope that Lan Wangji would wake before he was done.

When the plates were empty and Wei Wuxian pleasantly full of both food and Emperor’s Smile, Lan Wangji had yet to stir. With a sigh, Wei Wuxian stood and brushed himself off, then reached for Lan Wangji’s arm to heave him over his shoulder so he could carry him back to the palace.

Except that as soon as he touched him, Lan Wangji’s eyes flew open.

Wei Wuxian stilled as Lan Wangji looked him over, then glanced at his waist when he felt Lan Wangji’s tail wrap around him.

“Ah, Lan Zhan. I can’t walk with your tail like that.”

Lan Wangji blinked, looking unrepentant.

“You need to let go so we can go back to the palace,” Wei Wuxian added, relieved when Lan Wangji uncurled his tail. And then Lan Wangji stood, grabbed a hold of Wei Wuxian’s sleeves, and started dragging him from the inn without a word.

“What are you—" Wei Wuxian said, automatically following Lan Wangji until he realized Lan Wangji was pulling him from the inn. “Wait, we haven’t paid!”

Lan Wangji abruptly stopped and Wei Wuxian ran into his back.

Before Wei Wuxian could complain, Lan Wangji strode over to the inn’s counter, pulled out his money pouch, and dropped it with a *thunk* on the counter. The innkeeper startled, glancing from Lan Wangji to Wei Wuxian with confusion.

“Aiya,” Wei Wuxian said, rushing forward and scooping up the pouch. “Don’t mind him, he always makes me pay,” he said as he hastily counted out the correct payment.

“I do not.”

Wei Wuxian paused after setting the coins down, turning to Lan Wangji.

“I do not make you pay,” Lan Wangji repeated, then reached out and pinched Wei Wuxian, hard, on the cheek.

Wei Wuxian yipped at the sudden pain and pulled away, rubbing his cheek. “What was that for?”

Lan Wangji, however, didn’t respond.

He merely nodded to himself, then grabbed ahold of Wei Wuxian’s arm and pulled him from the inn.

Lan Wangji led Wei Wuxian back through the stalls that slowly had shifted from daily to nightly wares. A subtle change in appearances and prices for a crowd that was dwindling quickly into those with nighttime jobs and ones seeking their company.

Wei Wuxian tried talking to Lan Wangji a few more times before giving up, tucking the money pouch into his sleeves as Lan Wangji dragged them to yet another stall supposedly selling demon protection charms.

It took longer than Wei Wuxian would like to admit before he realized that Lan Wangji was drunk.

He had only had a taste of Emperor’s Smile, but when Wei Wuxian looked closer under the moonlight, he caught a faint sheen on Lan Wangji’s cheeks and a soft red cresting his ears.

“Who would’ve thought that the great Hanguang-jun could be bested by such a small drink!” Wei Wuxian laughed, then yet again smacked into Lan Wangji’s back when he suddenly stopped walking.

“Aiya!” Wei Wuxian whined. “You can’t keep doing that!”

“No.”

“No what?” Wei Wuxian asked as he rubbed his nose and threw a petulant glare at Lan Wangji. His husband furrowed his brow and tugged on Wei Wuxian’s arm.

“Not my name.”

Not his…? “But you are Hanguang—”

“No.” Lan Wangji punctuated his disapproval with a small stomp of his foot. He growled when Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to disagree, and Wei Wuxian smartly clicked his mouth shut.

After glaring at one another for several moments, Wei Wuxian tried again.

“Lan Zhan—”

“Mn. Correct,” Lan Wangji said, his brow smoothing as he nodded in approval. “Good husband.”

Despite himself Wei Wuxian flushed, his features itching to be free.

“Let us continue,” Lan Wangji added, and Wei Wuxian could do nothing but follow as Lan Wangji continued dragging him to various stalls.

After they had wandered around for what felt like half the night, Lan Wangji stopped in front of a stall selling children’s toys, of all things.

Little wooden drums and grass trinkets covered the table, and Lan Wangji stared at them intensely while repeatedly tugging on Wei Wuxian’s sleeve.

“Do you want something?” Wei Wuxian asked, and Lan Wangji pursed his lips with a minute shake of his head. Wei Wuxian shrugged and tried stepping away, but Lan Wangji held steadfast, refusing to budge.

Wei Wuxian looked over the toys again, trying to parse why Lan Wangji had stopped here when it hit him.

“Did you want to buy something for A-Yuan?”

Lan Wangji didn’t respond, but his tail swished back and forth.

“That’s a nice idea, but A-Yuan doesn’t need any more toys,” Wei Wuxian said, then stepped away from the stall only to find that Lan Wangji had somehow vanished from his side.

Immediately worried, Wei Wuxian looked around until he spotted Lan Wangji at another stall that was selling meat skewers. As Wei Wuxian walked over, Lan Wangji darted forward

when the stall owner wasn't looking and stole a few meat skewers before rushing back to Wei Wuxian.

And then he presented the skewers to Wei Wuxian with a pleased expression.

"Lan Zhan, why did you take those?" Wei Wuxian asked, baffled.

"For Wei Ying."

"You can't just—" Wei Wuxian cut himself off when he realized the futility of arguing with his drunk husband. With a groan, Wei Wuxian hurried to pay the stall owner for the pilfered skewers then rejoined Lan Wangji.

"We ate not too long ago. I don't need more food."

"Eat," Lan Wangji insisted, handing the skewers to Wei Wuxian. "Wei Ying is too thin."

Wei Wuxian took the skewers with a sigh, and steadily devoured them as Lan Wangji hurried to pull him to another stall.

When the skewers were gone, Wei Wuxian was exhausted from all their running around. The moon was high in the sky and the vendors had packed up for the night, leaving few people in the streets.

The bottom of their robes were covered in dirt, and Wei Wuxian slowly accepted that all he wanted to do was head back to the palace, take a warm bath, and collapse into bed.

"Lan Zhan, we should head back."

Lan Wangji stopped walking and turned to Wei Wuxian before shaking his head.

"But Lan Zhan, I'm tired," Wei Wuxian said, tugging on Lan Wangji's arm.

"Wei Ying doesn't like the palace," Lan Wangji replied, his lips twitching into a frown.

Wei Wuxian froze, his fingers digging into Lan Wangji's arm.

"And I will not make Wei Ying a prisoner," Lan Wangji added, then strode away in the opposite direction of the palace.

Wei Wuxian swallowed around the tightness in his throat and hurried to catch up.

Lan Wangji refused to leave Caiyi, but he didn't fight Wei Wuxian when he recommended spending the night at the inn they had eaten at. The inn was thankfully still open, and the innkeeper too tired to notice who they were as Wei Wuxian requested a room and for a bath to be sent up.

Wei Wuxian didn't relax until they stepped into their room, and then he collapsed into a chair and unhooked suibian from his side.

“Okay Lan Zhan, we’re done for the day.”

Lan Wangji stared, then followed suit in removing bichen from his waist.

But instead of sitting down to wait for the bath, Lan Wangji drifted across the room and stood behind a dressing screen.

Thinking he wanted to change for the evening, Wei Wuxian didn’t bother him. Except that Lan Wangji’s silhouette behind the screen didn’t move, and Lan Wangji eventually leaned around the screen with puffed out cheeks.

When Wei Wuxian met his gaze, Lan Wangji darted back behind the screen. They repeated the cycle once more before Wei Wuxian stood and walked over to the screen, only for Lan Wangji to run across the room.

Wei Wuxian tried getting closer but Lan Wangji stayed out of reach, and Wei Wuxian laughed at how much like A-Yuan Lan Wangji was behaving.

Oh.

Wei Wuxian grinned and raised his hands, darting a quick look towards the windows and deeming them high enough to not be visible from the street before he let his features show.

Lan Wangji’s face lit up and his tail swished happily.

“Little dragons better be quick lest this fox catch them,” Wei Wuxian called, then darted forward to chase Lan Wangji around.

Wei Wuxian did his best not to fall over laughing from how adorable Lan Wangji looked as they played tag. Despite his drunkenness, Lan Wangji was fast, and it took Wei Wuxian awhile to catch him. When he did, he crooned his victory and then danced away for Lan Wangji to chase.

However, he only managed to take one step before Lan Wangji promptly froze his feet to the floor.

“I win.”

Wei Wuxian staggered, pinwheeling his arms before he regained his balance and glared at Lan Wangji.

“That’s cheating, Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian protested.

Lan Wangji stared, unresponsive.

“Let me go.”

“No,” Lan Wangji said, letting out a pleased rumble.

“Fine then. See how you like it,” Wei Wuxian muttered, then lifted his hands and reached for Lan Wangji’s vision with his powers, tweaking it ever so slightly. Not enough to harm—just enough to show Wei Wuxian breaking free from the ice and chasing after Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji didn’t seem to notice the difference and darted away again, letting Wei Wuxian’s illusions chase him around the room until Wei Wuxian broke himself free from the ice and their bath arrived.

Wei Wuxian had never been more grateful to see a steaming bath.

Until he told Lan Wangji to go first and his husband scowled and asserted he didn’t need to.

“Wei Ying should have it,” Lan Wangji insisted as Wei Wuxian pinched the bridge of his nose with a soft growl.

“There’s enough water for both of us to a take a bath. I’ll go after you,” Wei Wuxian said, wilting in relief when Lan Wangji let out an agreeable hum and stepped toward the bath.

“I’ll even set up the privacy screen for you,” Wei Wuxian added as he grabbed the screen from across the room and dragged it over. He set it up in front of the bath and stepped around it, leaving Lan Wangji to his privacy.

Not that he wasn’t tempted to see his husband bathing, but it felt wrong to do when Lan Wangji was drunk.

Wei Wuxian had sat down at the table when he heard a loud clatter and turned to see that Lan Wangji had knocked the privacy screen over. Wei Wuxian fixed the screen, but as soon as he stepped away Lan Wangji knocked it over again.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian admonished as he reset the screen, and then stared as Lan Wangji reached out, picked up the screen, *then snapped it in half.*

What the fuck.

Speechless, Wei Wuxian looked from the broken screen to Lan Wangji, who rumbled with a satisfied expression.

And then began stripping without warning.

The sight of Lan Wangji’s pale skin snapped Wei Wuxian out of his stupor and he whirled around, face flaming. *“Lan Zhan!”*

“Wei Ying?” Lan Wangji questioned, and Wei Wuxian hesitantly peeked over his shoulder.

Only to see that Lan Wangji was naked, his robes piled on the floor.

Wei Wuxian slapped his hands over his eyes and turned away with a whine.

But he couldn’t unsee how handsome his husband had looked, *or how well-endowed.*

A warmth spread through him and he wheezed, pressing his hands harder against his face. *Lan Wangji was drunk, he just needed to—*

"Get in the bath, Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian ordered, and only removed his hands from his eyes after he heard Lan Wangji sloshing into the water. "Good, now hurry up before it gets cold. I'll leave you to take of yourself."

Wei Wuxian took one step away from the bath, then stilled when he heard the telltale sounds of someone stepping out of the bath and water dripping on the floor.

"Lan Zhan, you need to take a bath," Wei Wuxian said, voice fraying and ears twitching as he willed himself not to turn around.

Lan Wangji huffed and stepped closer to Wei Wuxian, close enough that he could feel water pooling at his feet and soaking his boots.

"No."

"Lan Zhan, *please,"* Wei Wuxian tried, and when only silence greeted him he hung his head in defeat. "Will you get in if I help you wash?"

"Mn," Lan Wangji hummed, then clambered back into the bath.

Wei Wuxian steeled himself before turning around, and he was lucky that he couldn't see much past where Lan Wangji's chest and legs were submerged in the water.

He could see more skin than he ever had before, however, and he couldn't stop his eyes from tracing drops of water down Lan Wangji's chest. Lan Wangji's skin was pale and smooth, and Wei Wuxian had to shake himself to stop staring.

Wei Wuxian gathered bathing soaps and a washing cloth then knelt beside the tub, explaining aloud to Lan Wangji how he planned on helping. Lan Wangji hummed in acceptance, and it was then Wei Wuxian noticed that Lan Wangji hadn't removed his forehead ribbon.

"Ah, you don't want that to get wet," Wei Wuxian said, then reached to tug the knot of it free.

"Do not touch it," Lan Wangji sharply said and Wei Wuxian froze, his eyes wide.

Then Lan Wangji dragged Wei Wuxian down into the bath.

Wei Wuxian spluttered as he went face-first into the water, scrambling to right himself. He flailed, disoriented until Lan Wangji hauled his head above water and brushed his hair from his face. His hands were gentle, light as a caress, and he didn't seem to mind that Wei Wuxian had ended up sprawled across his lap.

His very naked lap.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian wheezed, face flaming. His clothes and tails were soaked, uncomfortable, and weighing him down as Lan Wangji wrapped his arms around his waist and let out a pleased rumble.

Wei Wuxian groaned and tried pushing himself up with his arms, but there was little room for him to brace himself without accidentally touching Lan Wangji. His hands ended up on Lan Wangji's thighs, distressingly close to more sensitive areas.

Lan Wangji's ears turned a deep red, and he met Wei Wuxian's gaze with a hunger so clear that Wei Wuxian lost his balance and fell back into the water.

He could feel Lan Wangji's interest through the wet robes over his stomach.

Wei Wuxian choked on water again, almost breaking the tub in desperation before Lan Wangji grabbed the back of his robes and hauled him up.

"Wei Ying would need to breathe. We cannot do that here."

Do what where? You're going to ruin this poor husband!

Unable to respond, Wei Wuxian coughed more water then shook his head. "I can't take a bath with you."

The glare Lan Wangji gave him spoke otherwise, and Wei Wuxian scrambled for an excuse.

"Okay, okay, but I need to get out to take off my robes."

Lan Wangji paused, then helped Wei Wuxian from the bath, watching him intently as he began removing his wet robes.

Wei Wuxian had disrobed enough in front of other people that he shouldn't have felt embarrassed—growing up at a pier and fighting a war would do that to you—but it felt different with Lan Wangji's eyes on him.

Wearing wet robes felt worse, however, and Wei Wuxian reminded himself that sharing a bath wasn't anything new. His features were already soaked, after all, which meant he'd have to wash and dry them properly regardless.

It was only when Wei Wuxian reached for the ties to his inner robes that he realized he couldn't take them off, lest Lan Wangji see his back.

Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath, eyes darting to Lan Wangji.

He seemed impatient, but was watching Wei Wuxian with his tail lazily flicking back and forth in the water.

Bathing with his inner robes on was an option, but Wei Wuxian wouldn't be able to get properly clean. *And Lan Zhan might disapprove and try to remove it.*

Grimacing, Wei Wuxian shakily undid the ties to his inner robes. There was enough room in the bath for him to get in facing Lan Wangji, keeping his back turned away. As long as he didn't turn around, Lan Wangji wouldn't see anything.

It was risky, but it might work.

Letting his inner robes fall open was easy, as was shucking off his trousers.

What wasn't easy was letting his robes slip from his shoulders and fall to the floor.

Wei Wuxian shivered as the chilly air around them brushed over his wet back, his skin pulling tight with a familiar ache. It felt *wrong,* and Wei Wuxian bit the inside of his cheek as he hid all but one of his tails and tried quickly entering the bath before Lan Wangji could notice anything.

Lan Wangji stopped Wei Wuxian from entering by spreading himself across the entire bath.

Baffled, Wei Wuxian could only watch as Lan Wangji raked his eyes over him, setting his cheeks aflame before Lan Wangji nodded and retreated to his side of the bath.

Wei Wuxian scrambled into the bath before he could further die of embarrassment.

The bath was large enough for two, but not quite large enough for them to sit comfortably facing one another. Wei Wuxian's legs ended up intertwined with Lan Wangji's, and he did his best not to kick Lan Wangji anywhere sensitive as he reached for a washing cloth and soap to clean himself.

Wei Wuxian had finished cleaning his arms when he realized Lan Wangji was sulking across from him.

"What's wrong?" Wei Wuxian asked. Lan Wangji huffed, kicked Wei Wuxian's legs to the side, and then yanked him across the bath. Wei Wuxian dropped his washing cloth and soap as Lan Wangji spun him around and settled him between his legs, pressing Wei Wuxian's back against his chest.

Wei Wuxian's breath died in his throat.

Lan Wangji could see his back.

A pained whine escaped Wei Wuxian and he didn't dare move, couldn't move, couldn't think past the panic engulfing him. *Years of failures written across his skin, scars latticed and thick and uglyuglyugly. Lan Zhan would hate—*

Lan Wangji rested his chin on Wei Wuxian's shoulder and Wei Wuxian's breath stuttered, broken and shaky, his hands half-lifted from the water with nowhere to place them.

Distantly, Wei Wuxian realized he was sitting in Lan Wangji's lap enough to feel the hot weight of his arousal against the small of his back. Wen Qing's stern reminder of *Water is not a lubricant!* echoed through his mind and a choked laugh tore through him, painful and sharp.

And then Lan Wangji traced his hands up Wei Wuxian's back, running along the scars that wrapped around his sides.

"L-Lan Zhan, you shouldn't look."

Lan Wangji tucked his face into the side of Wei Wuxian's neck, then slowly moved from tracing the scars on his sides to trailing his hands over ones that spanned his entire back.

"They're from a long time ago," Wei Wuxian added, hearing himself speak as if his ears were stuffed with cotton. Heavy and dense and not quite like he was actually speaking.

Lan Wangji's fingers paused, then trailed upwards over the scars near Wei Wuxian's shoulders.

"They're not important," Wei Wuxian whispered, then jolted in pain when Lan Wangji let out a displeased rumble and *bit his shoulder.*

"Lan Zhan, I'm not food!" Wei Wuxian wailed, his shoulder stinging as he slapped a hand over where Lan Wangji had bit him, ears pressing flat against his head.

"You can't just—ah!" Wei Wuxian cried as Lan Wangji leaned over Wei Wuxian's other shoulder and bit him without letting go. The pain was bright and sharp, and sent a wave of heat through Wei Wuxian like a warm fire, coiling low and steady below his midsection.

Lan Wangji wrapped his arms around Wei Wuxian's stomach and the heat grew, which would become a problem if Lan Wangji's hands strayed any farther down.

Wei Wuxian was contemplating breaking the tub to escape when Lan Wangji released him and went limp with a happy rumble. Wei Wuxian panted in the resulting silence, then chanced a glance at his shoulders.

The bitemarks weren't bleeding, but they were deep enough for him to clearly see the outline Lan Wangji's teeth had left. Wei Wuxian glared at Lan Wangji, only to find him resting against the back of the bath with his eyes closed.

Wei Wuxian waited several minutes before he slowly fished out the soap and washing cloth he had dropped. When Lan Wangji didn't move, Wei Wuxian began the task of washing himself as much as he could without leaving Lan Wangji's lap.

But he'd need to move to wash Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian steeled himself then turned around in the bath, relieved when Lan Wangji didn't protest, although his eyes slid open to watch Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian quickly set to work, washing Lan Wangji as best he could without venturing anywhere dangerous.

It was cumbersome and awkward, and whenever Wei Wuxian's arms moved too close to Lan Wangji's face, Lan Wangji nipped at them with a petulant look.

The bath had gone cold by the time Wei Wuxian finished, and he pulled himself from the bath and all but ran to dry himself and slip into a set of spare inner robes he had brought in a qiankun pouch.

Getting Lan Wangji from the bath, back into his inner robes, then into bed went about as well as Wei Wuxian had expected. By the end of it Lan Wangji was in bed in his inner robes, but

Wei Wuxian's own had come untied after Lan Wangji had draped himself over Wei Wuxian and tugged at them.

At least Lan Wangji didn't have any fur that needed drying.

Which reminded Wei Wuxian that he needed to let all his tails out and dry them properly. Sighing, Wei Wuxian let the remainder of his tails unfurl, grimacing from the pull of their soaked weight as he rummaged around for his brush, a dry cloth, and some oil.

When he gathered everything he needed, he moved to sit at the table then looked up when he heard a sudden growl.

Lan Wangji was staring at him with a displeased expression.

"Lan Zhan, I need to dry my tails properly," Wei Wuxian said, exhaustion lacing his voice. "And I can't join you," he added, biting back that it wouldn't be proper. They were married, but they had yet to share a bed and it felt wrong to do so when Lan Wangji wasn't thinking properly.

"Will not sleep without Wei Ying," Lan Wangji replied, and Wei Wuxian promptly gave up.

"I'll join you as soon as I'm finished," Wei Wuxian promised, then set about the arduous task of fixing his tails for the night.

Wei Wuxian was half-asleep when he finally finished grooming his tails, and he doused the remaining candles in the room with a flick of his hand and stumbled over to the bed. He flopped face-first onto it with a groan, and didn't protest when Lan Wangji's arms wrapped around him and pulled him against his chest.

Warm.

He hadn't slept in the same bed as anyone other than A-Yuan since the war, but Lan Wangji radiated a steady warmth despite his ice affinity, and the day's travels quickly caught up to Wei Wuxian.

Sleep pulled him under, heavy and dark as he relaxed into Lan Wangji's arms.

Chapter End Notes

For what it's worth, the sexual tension is killing me too. OTL

Also, please picture that as night fell Lan Qiren got progressively more and more concerned that they hadn't returned home, which led to the following:

LQR: -bursts into lxc's rooms-
LQR: Have you seen Wangji?

LXC: -hastily covering the letter he was reading, his cheeks a deep red-
LXC: N-Not this evening?
LQR: ...is that a letter from Jin Guangyao?
LXC: -stares-
LQR: -stares back-
LXC: ...I'll copy the rules from the third book for my impure thoughts, Shufu.
LQR: *Xichen!*

End Notes

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